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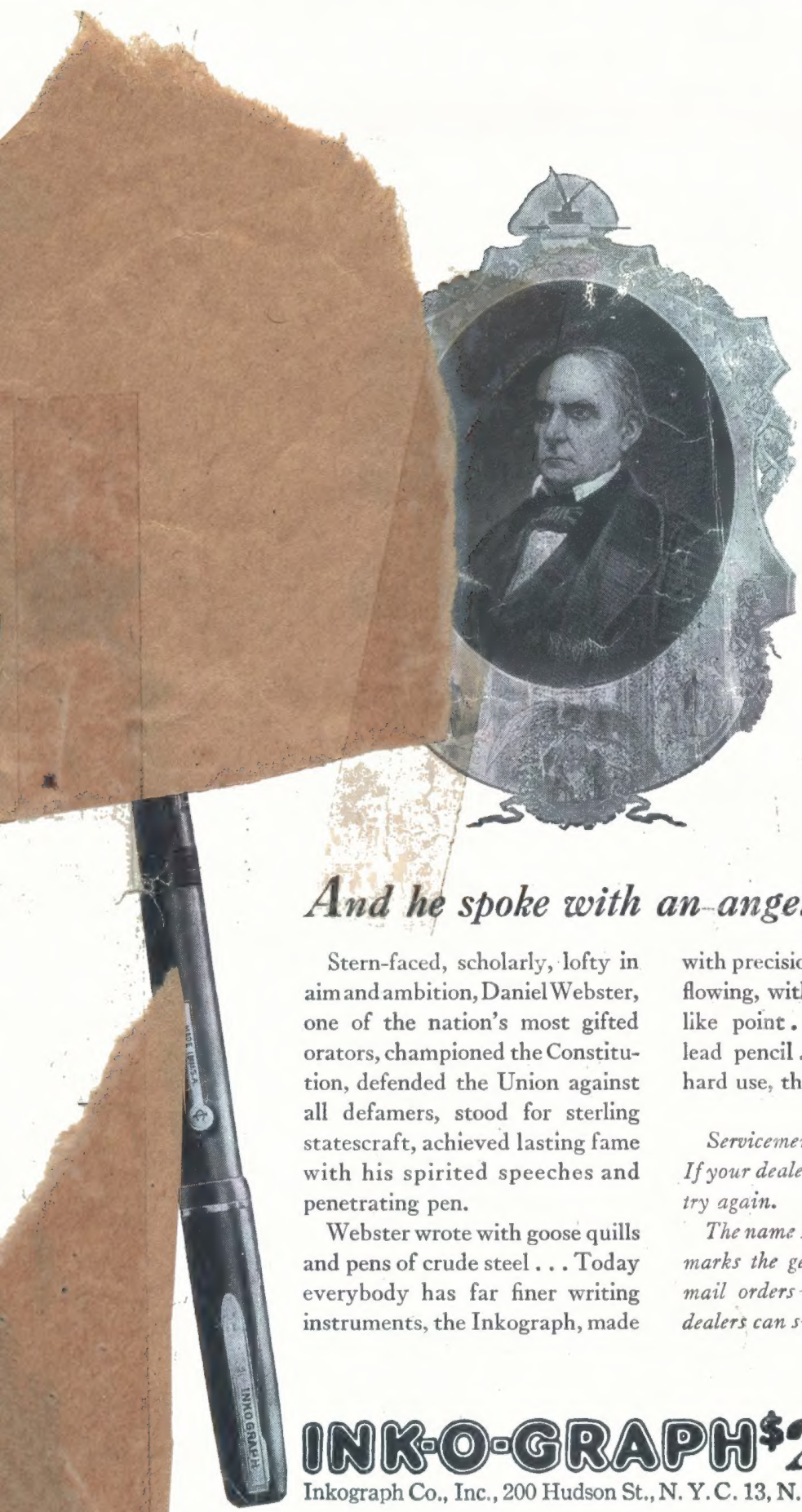
A SPEED MAGAZINE

BLACK HORSE MESA

by

WILLIAM HEUMAN



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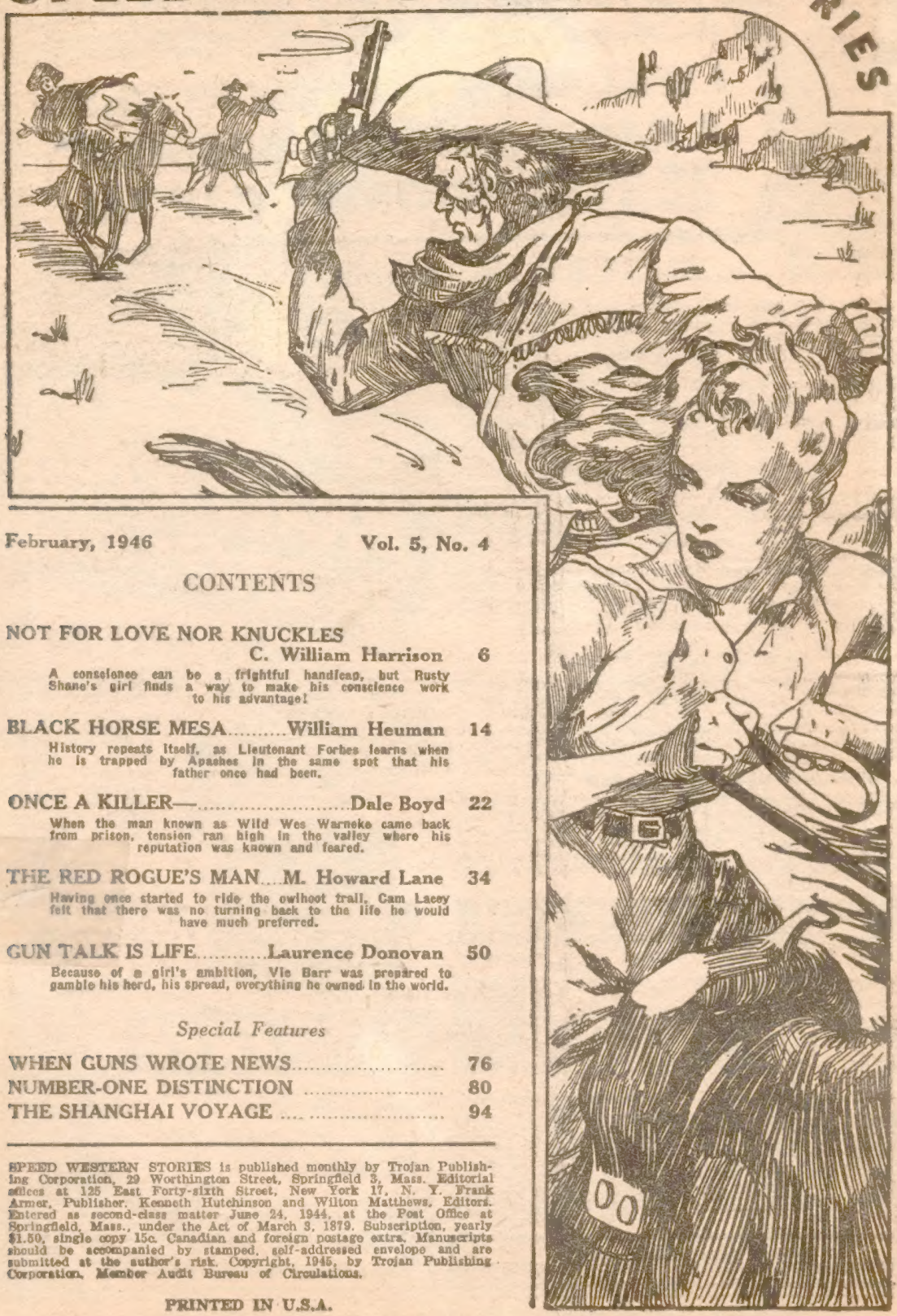

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THE February issue of LEADING WESTERN features three remarkable novelettes, *The Hoot of the Owl* by William R. Cox, *Lay Down the Iron Rail* by William Heuman, and *Gold Ain't Love* by Laurence Donovan. We challenge you to match them anywhere except in a Speed magazine!

As for the new member of the Speed family of magazines, you'll like the first issue of SIX GUN WESTERN. The first issue is dated March and it concentrates upon the kind of highly dramatic stories that the title implies. Consider *When Bullets Pay Off*, by Joseph Chadwick. It's a tale of a mule-skinner trying to buck a building railroad, and of the mule-skinner's fight against the forces that are against both himself and the railroad. Or consider *Stars of Empire*, by William Heuman. It's a story with the wide sweep of the frontier pulsing through every page. Plus other meaty fictional fare in abundance.

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—The Editors

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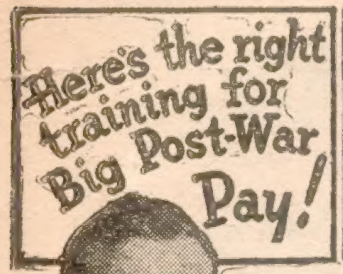

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NOT FOR LOVE NOR KNUCKLES

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

IT WAS SAID of Rusty Shane that he had the right kind of fists but the wrong kind of conscience. Not that any man in Goldfield would have suggested Rusty should be dishonest. But all agreed he could have been a richer man if he had leaned a shade more toward the shady side.

Even if I tell this, you won't believe it. But go out to Goldfield, or what is left of it now, and ask any old-timer who was there forty-five years ago dur-

Poor Rusty Shane. Certainly, he had the right kind of knuckles, but unfortunately, he had the wrong kind of conscience

ing the boom days. He'll tell you the same story.

Rusty Shane lost his mule, and after ten hours following tracks he found the beast. Rusty had never before been known to lose his temper. He did this time. He picked up a rock, threw it at the leathery rump of the desert canary. The mule kicked the offending rock, shattering it. Shattered open the door to half a million dollars. That was how Rusty discovered his gold mine.

He made the forty mile hike to Goldfield and reported his find to Lee Austin, who had grub-staked him. He had watched the eyes of Austin's daughter, Jody, brighten with pride and a warmth that was infinitely more personal.

Rusty had listened to Austin's quick shrewd planning. "Gus Mays is in town lookin' for a mine," Lee Austin said. "I'll call him over, and you can show him your samples. That ore you've got will assay three hundred dollars to the ton if it'll show a cent."

The ring up-ended and Rusty struck the packed earth.

Rusty said uncertainly, "I didn't follow the vein in very far."

"So what if you didn't!" Austin declared. "You got rich ore out of the ground, didn't you? Gus Mays, Key Pittman, Charles Schwab, and all them other back-east capitalists are in town lookin' for ground. So you show Mays your sample and assay report, and offer to sell out your claim for a hundred thousand."

"It might only be a pocket," Rusty said doubtfully.

"Any mine is a gamble," Lee Austin over-ruled. "I'm goin' after Gus Mays."

But when the big man strode into

Lee Austin's general store, Rusty said, "I only followed the vein in for thirty feet, Mr. Mays. So I reckon it's only fair to warn you that my find might not turn out to be just a rich pocket."

Rusty didn't have the nerve to glance toward Lee Austin, but he heard the man's apoplectic groan. That was when most of Nevada tacked a T onto Rusty's name. "Trusty" Shane.

He didn't get the hundred thousand Lee Austin had told him to ask for his mine. His conscience saw to that. Rusty got a cool five hundred for his discovery. A very cool five hundred. And he got very blunt and heated orders from Lee Austin never to be seen again in the company of Jody.

It was one of those August days when the air is hotter than a honkeytonk dancer when Rusty Shane returned to Goldfield. He climbed out of the stage, and immediately felt the impersonal jostling of the crowd eddying along the plank walk. He pushed through the traffic of merchants, miners, and dressed-to-the-minute speculators, and found himself a protected spot close to the frame wall of the express office.

Yes, this was Goldfield all right. It was hard to recognize after his year's absence. In the space of twelve short months it had grown from a tent camp of a few hundred souls into a desert boom town with an over-flowing population. Maybe fifteen thousand people, Rusty thought, and this gave him a measure of security. He had a reputation to live down.

But his feeling of security did not last for long. It ended with the quick glance of a passing man. The man halted abruptly, planting his weight against the steady current of the crowd. He surveyed Rusty speculatively, seeing strong hands and shoulders that hinted plenty of power; a tall thinned-down shape and a rugged, if somewhat battered, face.

The man stated bluntly, "You wouldn't be loafing here if you had a job. I can use a man like you in my mine. I pay twenty dollars a day. How about it?"

Rusty smiled. "I wouldn't be worth it."

The man shrugged, started to hurry on. Then he halted, came back. He surveyed Rusty with sharp curiosity.

"You wouldn't be worth my pay?"

Rusty shook his head. "I'm leaving town day after tomorrow. Anyhow I don't like hard work."

It was a statement Rusty regretted the instant he had uttered it. He saw recognition drag amusement into the man's bold eyes.

"Only one man I ever heard of would say a thing like that. You must be T-rusty Shane."

RUSTY strode quickly away. Yes, this was Goldfield, a town which knew the violence and excitement of harvesting millions in gold ore yet could not forget the small unusual quirks of a man's character.

Rusty's plan had been to travel to Goldfield, do his job, and then be quickly out of town. Even to his strict and ever-demanding conscience, he had never admitted any intention of entering Lee Austin's place of business. Rusty had his pride.

But when he came even with Lee Austin's store, his pride turned to clay. He found himself turning into the broad open door, past the heterogeneous display of tubs and tools and mining gear, into the cool broad room with its mingled smells of meat and cloth and open bins of dried fruit.

Jody was behind the long counter, and Rusty just stood there and looked at her. She wore calico, and, watching her in his quick eager way, Rusty thought that the past year had done only good things to her.

Then her eyes came around to him, and shock made a visible impact on her face. "Rusty!" She came around the end of the counter, almost running. She came straight into his arms. "Oh, Rusty!"

For a moment he kept his arms around her, tight, afraid to release her and afraid to continue holding her. Housewives had forgotten their shopping lists, and were looking on, smiling. Men were beginning to clog the store's doorway,

curious and grinning. Lee Austin was striding out of his office, his mouth stern with disapproval.

Rusty said, "Jody, you shouldn't have." She didn't seem to hear him. Her face was hard against his chest, and he thought she was sobbing a little. He had never known she cared this much. He had imagined his year's absence— "Your father is coming, Jody."

He pushed her gently away from him, and then he saw the wetness in her eyes. She said, deep and quick with her voice, "Rusty, it's been so long. A whole year! I didn't know where you went or if you'd ever come back."

Because he remembered her father's heady temper, Rusty tried to make it easy for her. "Your father is coming," he said again.

Jody Austin had a spirit and stubbornness of her own. "I don't care."

Lee Austin halted in front of them, his eyes condemning Rusty. He said severely, "Daughter—"

Then he saw what was in his daughter's eyes, and he shrugged briefly. "Must you two make a spectacle of yourselves?" he grunted. "Come back to my office."

BEHIND the closed door of his office, Lee Austin turned to his desk. His shoulders were stiff and flat, and in that Rusty could read the man's anger. Yet Rusty could feel only a sympathy for the man. Lee Austin had been forced to be a mother as well as a father to his daughter. He had made his plans for her, and had fought half a lifetime to bring them to reality. His only mistake lay in his blind refusal to realize the futility of trying to make his wishes her wishes, in being unable to understand that his daughter had become a grown woman with a mind of her own.

Suddenly seeing her as she was gave him a visible jolt. He swung around on them, more composed now and resigned, chewing the end off a cigar.

Rusty said, "I didn't mean to come in here, Lee. I didn't plan on seeing Jody at all, knowing how you felt. It just—it just happened, I reckon. Believe me . . ."

"I believe you. Who wouldn't believe anything you say?" Austin's laugh was low and caustic. "Trusty Shane!"

Rusty took that in silence, thinking that after a year it seemed the man should have been able to forget.

Austin pressed, "You given any more mines away?"

Rusty swallowed back his rising anger. "What I did that day was according to the way I see things." He let that fall against Lee Austin's bitter silence. Then he said, "I've got my own rules, Lee, same as you've got yours. I'd never felt right if I'd rooked Gus Mays out of a big price for a cheap hole in the ground."

"You hear what came out of that hole in the ground?" Lee Austin said coldly. "Half a million dollars, and they haven't hit the end of that vein yet. The five hundred dollars you got was a fool's price for that mine."

Jody said sharply, "Dad, can't you let him alone."

"No man lets a fool alone for long." He swung squarely on his daughter. "Maybe I've been blind in the plans I've made for you, but I've had my eyes opened today. Now it's time you had your eyes opened."

He glared at Rusty Shane. "Tell her what you've been doing for a living this past year."

"Prize-fighting." Rusty said it simply, frankly.

Jody said quietly, "That is his business, dad."

Lee Austin said stonily to Rusty, "You'd like to marry Jody, and I've known for a long while how she feels about you, much as I tried to change that. But it takes money to set up a home—if you'd ever have a home traveling from town to town fighting for a few dirty dollars. Tell her how much you've got saved, Shane."

"Almost a thousand dollars."

"A thousand dollars!" Austin snorted. "The way prices are around here, it'd cost you half that to pay for the wedding."

"I don't want a fancy wedding," Jody said firmly.

Lee Austin was beaten then, and he knew it. But he was a man who had come up the hard way, who tried to salvage everything possible out of defeat.

He said grimly, "Ever since you left town, I've kept track of you because I knew how Jody felt. When I heard you'd started prize-fighting, I began buying all the Coast newspapers. I know your record, and it ain't good. Won eleven fights and lost forty. You're too damnfool anxious to give the other guy a more than even break. A good puncher can knock you silly—and has plenty times."

RUSTY held his silence. He knew what was coming, and he was wondering how he would take it. He waited.

"But I'm the only one in town who knows your record," Austin went on. "Your fight with Mike Coe comes off tomorrow, and he's tough. He's out of the mines; he can kill a mule with either fist. He almost whipped Stanley Ketchel, and you can't dance around and do that. A saloon owner here, Tex Rickard, is even talking about promoting a fight between Mike Coe and the champ. So it adds up that you ain't got a chance of beating Coe."

Rusty couldn't help saying it. There was a streak in him that wouldn't let him salve reality. It had cost him a gold mine and it had cost him Lee Austin's friendship, but he couldn't change what was in him. It was there, and it had to come out.

"I know that," he said.

"But you're not going to be fool enough to let this town hear you admit you're licked before you ever take a punch," Lee Austin bit out. "For once in your life you're going to play smart. You're going to let me build you up a reputation that's bigger than Mike Coe's."

Rusty said doubtfully, "It don't sound quite honest to me."

"What's crooked about it?" Austin flared. "Everyman's got a right to talk himself up, dammit! If this town decides to put its money on you—and they sure enough will when I'm finished—that's not for you to cry about. It's their bad luck if they're not smart enough to find out we'll have all our money bet on Mike Coe to win."

They left it like that. Rusty rented himself a room for the night, and bought himself a meal, but he could whip up none of his old healthy relish for good food. Nothing had seemed right since he had walked out of Lee Austin's store.

He argued with himself. *"It'll be for Jody. And there's nothing really crooked about it."*

At the end of day, he picked up Jody at the store. They treaded their way along the street, and she walked straight and tall beside him, saying nothing. She was a women wise to the ways of a man, with an ability to look inside him and sense his wishes, the change of his humor. If he wanted conversation, she could give it, cheerfully and sensibly. If he wanted silence, then she could also give that.

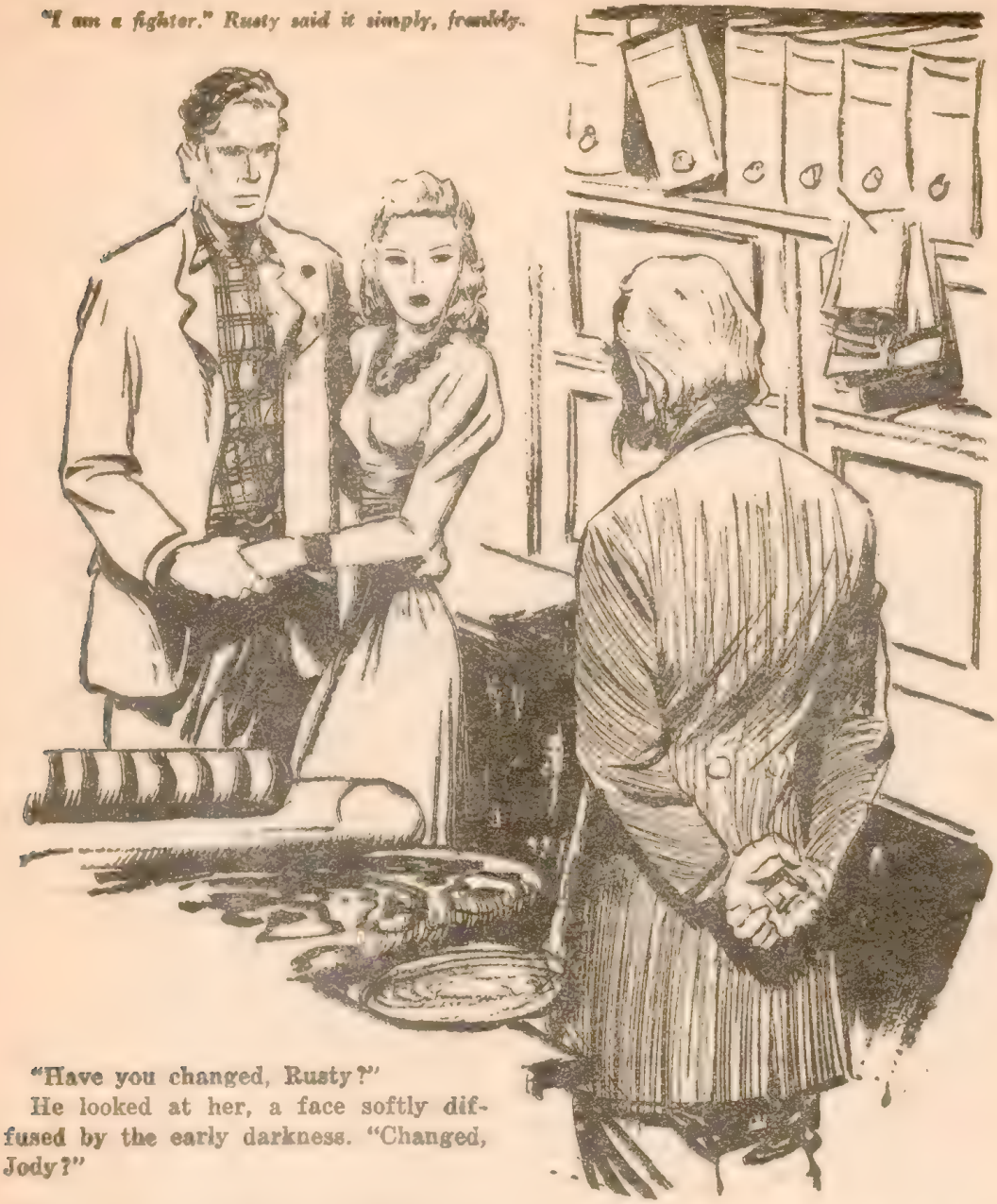
They left Main Street, and made the slow climb up the hill to her home. They halted on the broad porch, with the town spread out below them in the deepening darkness. Streets checkered with the yellow rectangles of lamplight, the mingled noises of the town's restless activities, the occasional grumble of some night shift's blasting in a mine tunnel.

"The town has changed, hasn't it?" Jody said.

Rusty Shane nodded.

Then it had been a young camp, fresh born on the desert. Now it was big and sprawling, grown too fast for its britches in its mad lust for gold. Violence was common in such a boom town where law was a loose, tenuous thing, where men were too eager for excitement after a long day's work. Red whiskey and the brassy laughter of percentage girls, gold in the pocket, and plenty more in the mines, buck the tiger, and to hell with the price. *Goldfield!*

"I am a fighter." Rusty said it simply, frankly.



"Have you changed, Rusty?"

He looked at her, a face softly diffused by the early darkness. "Changed, Jody?"

SHE said it slowly, uncertainly. "I mean the way you feel about me?" She went on quickly, making an escape for him if he wanted a way out. "After all, I guess I rushed things this afternoon. Seeing you there—after so long—I couldn't help what I did. Maybe I took things for granted."

Rusty said, "Nothing can ever change how I feel about you, Jody."

Silence came between them again. The night life of the town was whipping up, rolling its many full noises up the slope of the hill. Lee Austin would be busy down there, drifting from saloon to saloon, buying drinks and ballooning Rusty Shane's reputation.

Austin would say, *"I've followed young Shane in the California newspapers. He's not one of these mining camp sluggers like Mike Coe. He's tough and fast; he's tricky like Jim Corbett. He'll cut Coe to pieces tomorrow."*

Jody said, "Dad matched the thou-

sand dollars you gave me. He told me to let Gus Mays lay our bets for us, and I told Gus how it was to be. Dad said he could change the odds to three to one against Mike Coe. That will get us six thousand when Coe wins."

"That's fine," Rusty said. He stood up.

Jody came close in the darkness. "Rusty, I heard something about Mike Coe. He's got a weak spot, they call it a glass jaw, I think. He can't take a hard punch on the chin. I thought you'd like to know."

"So I won't hit him there and accidentally win?" His voice was dry, and he didn't try to change it. "Now we know all the secrets, don't we?"

HE found Lee Austin well surrounded by listeners in Tex Rickard's Northern. He went past the game tables, pushing his way through the crowd at the bar. Lee Austin saw him, called out.

"Here's your next champ, men! Come over here, Rusty."

In this crowd were the gamblers and promoters, the miners and merchants of Goldfield's sporting element. Gus Mays was there, smiling and rotund, his shrewd eyes missing no small detail.

Lee Austin said heartily, "Tell them about your West Coast fighting record, Rusty."

Silence rubbed out the murmuring of the crowd, and Rusty thought, *"They're all ready for the bait."* All he had to do was talk himself up, as any man had a right to do, and come through this fight with a nice start for himself and Jody.

"I've won a few fights," was what he told them.

Lee Austin's mouth pinched in at the corners. But he tried to crowd his bluff home. "He's just too modest to tell it," he scoffed.

Gus Mays pressed forward, smiling shrewdly. He said, "We're not interested in your past record. All we want to know is how you feel about Mike Coe. Do you think you can beat him?"

He's helping Austin throw the crowd, Rusty thought. And he said, "I'll sure enough try."

"We know that," Gus Mays prodded. "Every man in this town who ever heard of you knows that. But do you think you can beat Mike Coe?"

Rusty looked at Lee Austin. Then he looked away, toward Gus Mays, toward the crowd.

He spoke one word. "No."

SATURDAY brought Goldfield out in all its color, with its end-of-week lust for show and excitement. The Northern, the Palace, the Mohawk, and the Hermitage, and all those other saloons thronged; the betting odds climbed to six-to-one in Mike Coe's favor. By mid-afternoon the saloons had emptied, the men gathering at the fight ring which had been set up at the edge of town.

Stripped to his tights, Rusty Shane made his way through the crowd, trying not to hear the good-natured bantering of the audience. Lee Austin was waiting near the roped enclosure, with Jody beside him.

Rusty said, "This is no place to bring a woman, Lee."

"Maybe this will open her eyes about you."

Rusty looked at Jody. "I wish—" But there was, after all, nothing for him to say.

Austin said acidly, "And I gave Jody a thousand dollars to win for a fool like you!"

Jody came close, nervous, a little frightened by what she had come to see. But her mouth was firm, smiling faintly.

"You know Mike Coe's weak spot, Rusty. They say he can't take a hard blow on the chin."

Rusty climbed through the ropes. Mike Coe was already in his corner, impatiently waiting. He was a head shorter than Rusty Shane, with a deep middle and a round, close-cropped head, and the power of a rock-crusher in his shoulders and arms. He was a man who would be hard to hurt, who would keep swinging until he dropped. If there was any man on

earth with the skill and strength to drop him, Rusty thought.

THE FIGHT began as Rusty had known it would begin, swiftly and savagely. Mike Coe came plunging across the arena with an almost animal singleness of purpose. This was fighting by the old rules, bare knuckles, with a round to be ended only by a knockdown. No time limit. A fight to the finish.

Coe's first blow was like fire suddenly raking along the side of Rusty's jaw. Even that glancing impact was enough to spin him around. He tried to leap away, but Mike Coe was lunging after him, brutal in his eagerness, his scarred features grinning . . . laughing throatily, a machine built for bruising and hurting. The next blow clubbed Rusty Shane to the ground.

Rusty got up. He put himself close to Mike Coe, trying to tie up the man's punishing fists, trying to last through this minute when his senses were shaken and unclear. But there was no relief for him close to Mike Coe. The man used his knuckles and his elbows and the meaty points of his shoulders. He rough-housed Rusty across the arena until Rusty was forced to break clear and put distance between them.

Now Mike Coe began a grim and patient stalking. Rusty kept fading away from the man, trying to lay out a pattern for this fight. He saw Coe's right fist pull back, cocking for a blow. The man's chin was exposed, and instinct started Rusty's fist stabbing toward this target. But he halted the blow before it landed. *"Mike's jaw is his weak spot!"* Jody had said.

Rusty slipped away from Mike's blow, side-stepping, keeping his distance. He was a man with no direction to his mind, no plan or purpose. He didn't know what to do, how to make his fight.

He was governed by his own strict sense of right and wrong, a sense of fairness, foolish or not, that left no room in him for Lee Austin's shrewd planning. He was a simple man who had been thrown out of gear by the complications Lee Austin and Jody had brought up.

They had bet their money and all Rusty's savings on Mike Coe to win, depending on Rusty to help build the odds in favor of their bet. Only Rusty had killed all that last night in Rickard's Northern, and the betting had immediately swung six to one in Coe's favor.

A blow caught Rusty in the chest, its solid impact driving him back off balance, trapping him in a corner of the squared circle. He feinted and side-stepped, but Mike Coe's hard knuckles sledged against his temple. The ring up-ended and Rusty struck the packed earth.

He heard the crowd's roar, heard Jody's thin and anxious cry.

"His jaw—his jaw, Rusty!"

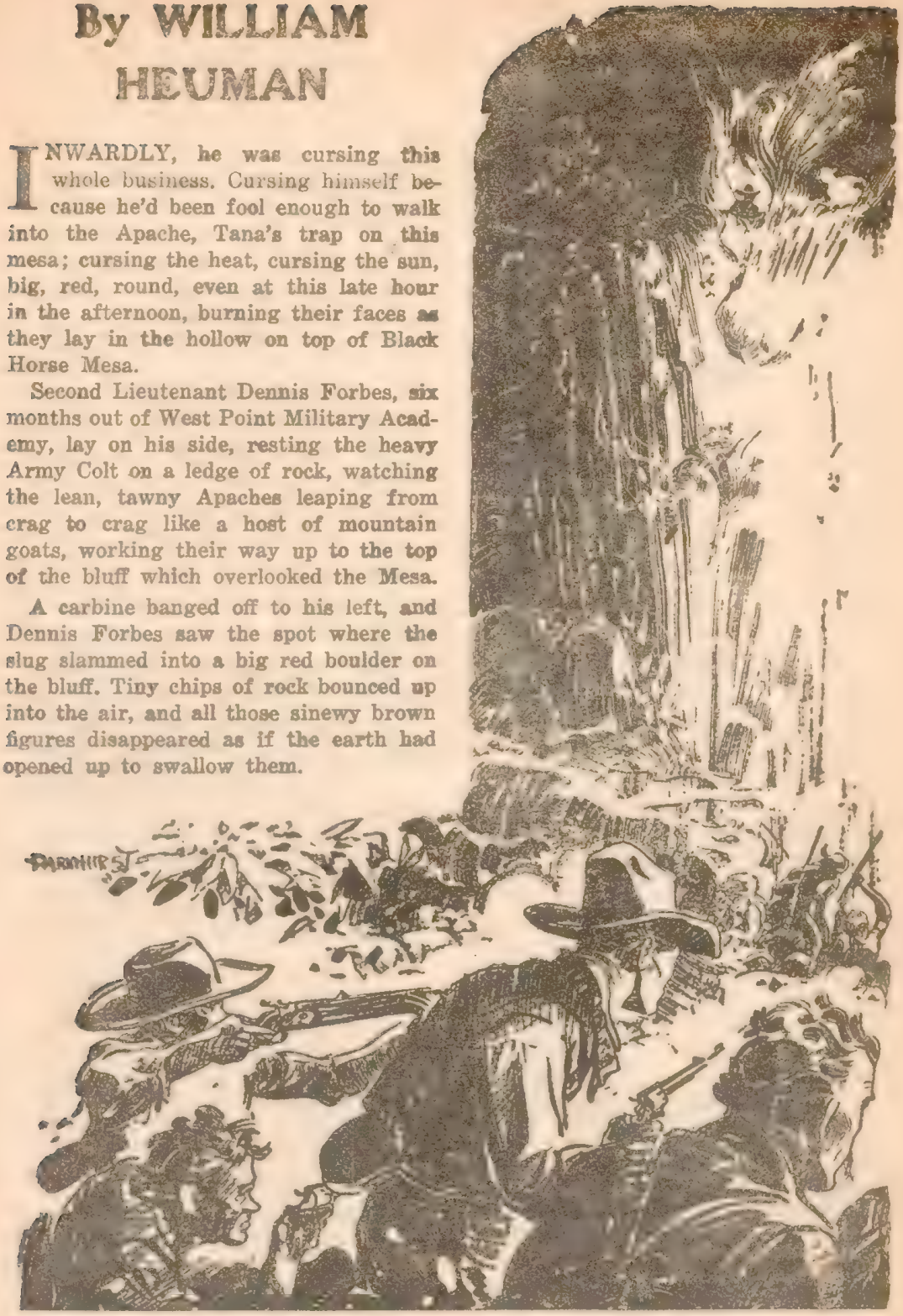
Yes, Rusty Shane thought, Mike Coe's jaw. His weak spot, his Achilles' heel. But he had been handed that secret as a gift, by Jody Austin, and he did not like that. It was like having an unfair advantage, and that went against his grain. If he had discovered Mike Coe's weakness during the fight, okay. But it was Jody who had brought him Mike's secret. To use it would have been like having outside help in his fight, like faking his ring record, like whooping up the sale of a good mine that might have turned out to be just a pocket of ore. It was foolish, all of this, and Rusty knew it. But he was what he was—Rusty Shane—and he refused to change.

He had his opening when he got to his feet. Mike Coe's jaw was unprotected, an inviting target. But Rusty did not take it. He stepped in, impatient and suddenly angered with himself and Jody and Lee Austin, with all the complications that had been developed by this fight. He wanted it over with, and he forgot skill and caution.

So he stepped in close to Mike Coe. He caught the man in the middle, a quick, shoulder-driven blow. It hurt, and that showed in Mike Coe's eyes. He took Mike's punch, and stood there, punishing Mike's middle. He brought the man's guard down, and he had the sudden understanding that a single blow to the

(Continued on page 86)

By WILLIAM HEUMAN



BLACK HORSE MESA

INWARDLY, he was cursing this whole business. Cursing himself because he'd been fool enough to walk into the Apache, Tana's trap on this mesa; cursing the heat, cursing the sun, big, red, round, even at this late hour in the afternoon, burning their faces as they lay in the hollow on top of Black Horse Mesa.

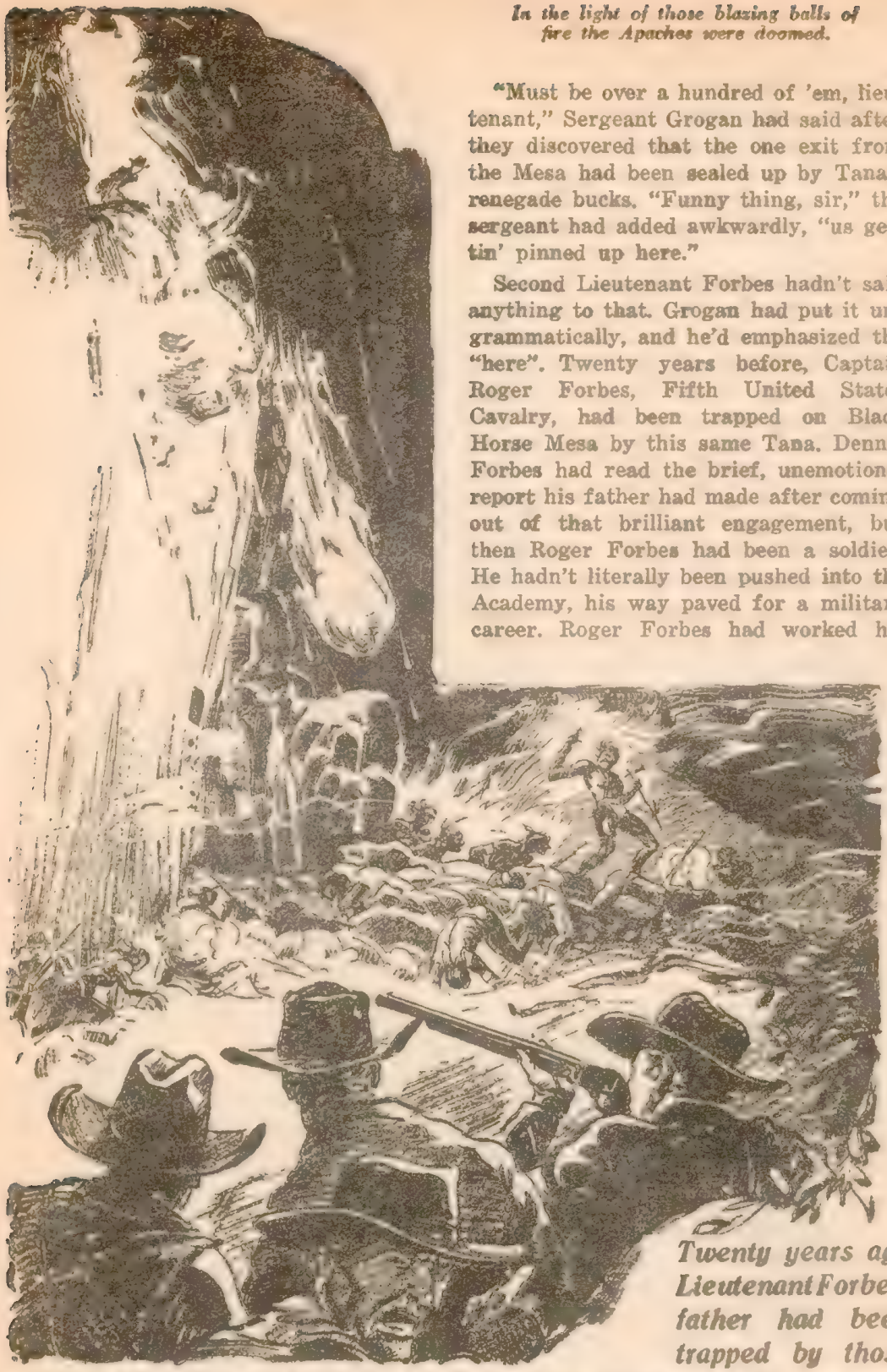
Second Lieutenant Dennis Forbes, six months out of West Point Military Academy, lay on his side, resting the heavy Army Colt on a ledge of rock, watching the lean, tawny Apaches leaping from crag to crag like a host of mountain goats, working their way up to the top of the bluff which overlooked the Mesa.

A carbine banged off to his left, and Dennis Forbes saw the spot where the slug slammed into a big red boulder on the bluff. Tiny chips of rock bounced up into the air, and all those sinewy brown figures disappeared as if the earth had opened up to swallow them.

In the light of those blazing balls of fire the Apaches were doomed.

"Must be over a hundred of 'em, lieutenant," Sergeant Grogan had said after they discovered that the one exit from the Mesa had been sealed up by Tana's renegade bucks. "Funny thing, sir," the sergeant had added awkwardly, "us gettin' pinned up here."

Second Lieutenant Forbes hadn't said anything to that. Grogan had put it ungrammatically, and he'd emphasized the "here". Twenty years before, Captain Roger Forbes, Fifth United States Cavalry, had been trapped on Black Horse Mesa by this same Tana. Dennis Forbes had read the brief, unemotional report his father had made after coming out of that brilliant engagement, but then Roger Forbes had been a soldier. He hadn't literally been pushed into the Academy, his way paved for a military career. Roger Forbes had worked his



Twenty years ago Lieutenant Forbes' father had been trapped by those same Apaches in the same place. But his father hadn't been encumbered with wounded men, and his father had had worlds more experience than he

way up through the ranks to a captaincy in the corps. Few enlisted men ever accomplished that feat.

Grogan, a tough, grizzled soldier, came over and squatted down beside the lieutenant. Dennis Forbes rubbed his sunburned cheeks and stared at the twenty odd cavalrymen squatting in this little hollow, Springfields, Spencers trained on the bluff, waiting for the Apaches to start moving again. There were twenty-five in this detachment, and five now lay wounded, two of them with pretty bad body wounds, sweating as they lay in the improvised shade of three army blankets held up by cleaning rods.

"We'll be needin' water, sir," Grogan murmured, "afore the night's over. Young Caldwell got it pretty bad in the stomach. He ain't sayin' much—"

"Get all the canteens together," Dennis ordered. "Ration out what water we have. Take care of the wounded first." He watched Grogan crawl away, a heavy-set man with graying hair—another man like his father who'd served out his life in the army and watched other men with the proper connections go past him.

AS A SOLDIER, people had told Dennis Forbes, they didn't come any finer than Roger Forbes, and he'd never gotten higher than a captaincy while younger, inexperienced men, had become majors and colonels.

"You can wait until you rot, Forbes," the adjutant at Fort Haley had told Dennis, "but if you don't know someone higher up you'll stay where you are."

There had been a lot of that kind of griping at Fort Haley; there had always been griping in the service, and Roger Forbes had warned him of that even before he entered the Point. Griping never seemed to have affected Captain Forbes; he'd been satisfied with the bone they'd tossed to him after thirty-five years in the army.

Dennis Forbes stared toward the bluff, the hardness coming into the slate gray of his eyes. He was twenty-two, and his father had been twenty-six when Tana bottled him up on top of Black Horse Mesa. He wondered how old that made Tana. The skinny old bag of bones who'd escaped from the Florida prison a year ago probably had no idea that he had the son of Captain Forbes nailed up on the plateau with eighty foot walls on three sides, the south end blocked by a swarm of crazed Apaches who'd skipped the reservation when the infamous Tana came back.

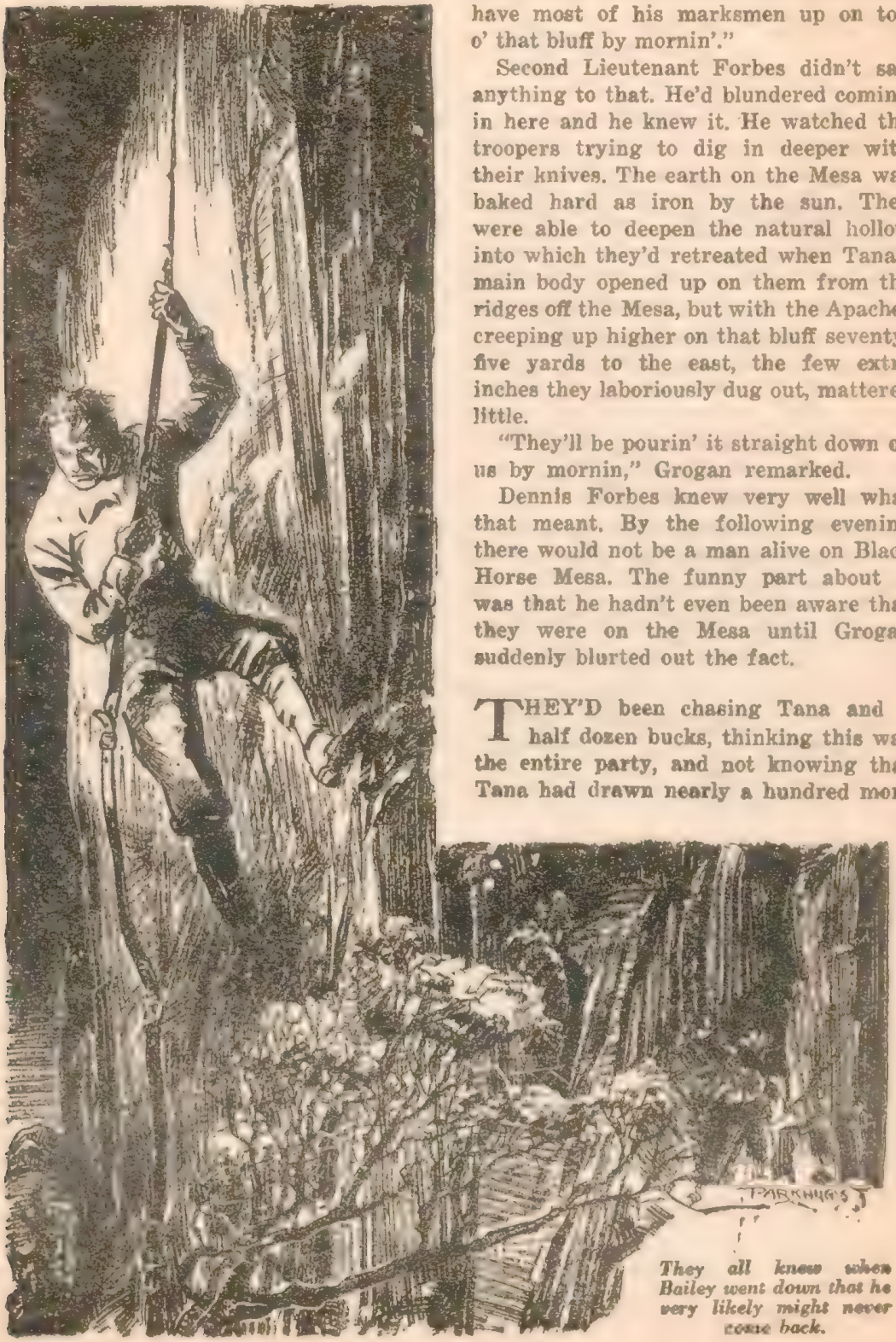
There was another actor in this little drama being enacted in this rough western Arizona country, and that was Sergeant Grogan. The veteran sergeant had been with Roger Forbes when they'd climbed down the precipitous north wall of Black Horse Mesa, split their forces down in the canyon, and then hit Tana with everything they had from two flanks as the Apache camped in the south entrance to the Mesa.

Tana, himself, had gotten a few bullets in the body, was captured, and shipped off to the Florida penitentiary. The power of the Apaches had been broken that night with half a dozen of Tana's head men killed, along with a lot of crazy young bucks. Roger Forbes had been brevetted for that piece of action on the canyon floor. He'd been mentioned in special dispatches going east, and he'd been awarded the captaincy.

Reading the report the father had made out, Dennis learned that Roger Forbes had had seventy-five men with him on the Mesa, and Tana nearly two hundred. Forbes, senior, had had no wounded, and it had been his intention to fight his way through the Apaches at the entrance and head for Fort Haley, hoping to meet a relief force he anticipated.

Dennis Forbes considered this fact grimly. His father had had a mobile force for his action; he'd been unencumbered with wounded, and he could strike out from the Mesa with the hope of breaking through the cordon. The five wounded in the present detachment could not travel under any circumstances, even if they'd had horses, but they'd left the animals eight miles back in a rocky gorge. Three guards remained with the stock, and they might be smart enough

to head back for Fort Haley for relief when the detachment on foot failed to return.



Sergeant Grogan closed the door on that last hope when he remarked bluntly.

"Three days to the Fort, an' three more back, which makes six. Tana will have most of his marksmen up on top o' that bluff by mornin'."

Second Lieutenant Forbes didn't say anything to that. He'd blundered coming in here and he knew it. He watched the troopers trying to dig in deeper with their knives. The earth on the Mesa was baked hard as iron by the sun. They were able to deepen the natural hollow into which they'd retreated when Tana's main body opened up on them from the ridges off the Mesa, but with the Apaches creeping up higher on that bluff seventy-five yards to the east, the few extra inches they laboriously dug out, mattered little.

"They'll be pourin' it straight down on us by mornin," Grogan remarked.

Dennis Forbes knew very well what that meant. By the following evening there would not be a man alive on Black Horse Mesa. The funny part about it was that he hadn't even been aware that they were on the Mesa until Grogan suddenly blurted out the fact.

THEY'D been chasing Tana and a half dozen bucks, thinking this was the entire party, and not knowing that Tana had drawn nearly a hundred more

They all knew when Bailey went down that he very likely might never come back.

Apaches from the Broken Hand Reservation. The old chieftain had set his braves along the ridges opposite the Mesa; he'd decoyed this detachment from the fort up onto the Mesa, scrambled down the identical side down which his nemesis, Roger Forbes, had gone years before, and left the son's troops high and dry, an islet of doomed men.

Five troopers had gone down in that first volley. They'd managed to return the fire and reach the hollow in which Roger Forbes had fought off Tana. Rusted cartridge shells lay in this hollow like leaves from a tree, and bright new ones were being jerked out of breech blocks every few minutes.

"Damned country," Grogan had scowled. "It looks all the same, an' then it looks all different. I ain't been up in the Black Horse country, lieutenant, since you father was at the post."

Grogan's tones indicated that he considered himself responsible for this cul-de-sac, and that was another strange thing that Second Lieutenant Dennis Forbes noticed. These twenty odd well men, and the five wounded accepted their fate with amazing tranquility. They'd figured the odds as coldly and as calculatingly as Sergeant Grogan had. It was three days to the fort and three back, if the horse guards sent a man back for help. It would take no more than a day for Tana's sharpshooters to pick off every man in blue on the Mesa.

Knowing these things, realizing the commanding officer at the post had sent out an inexperienced young officer to pick up Tana, and therefore blundered, they had exhibited no bitterness. Calmly accepting the situation at its face value, they were prepared to sell their lives dearly.

Sergeant Grogan sank down beside Dennis Forbes again, mopping his wet face with his sleeve. They were not pretty, these men, on a scout. There were no rakish forage caps, no neat blue coats or blue breeches with the yellow stripe down the side, no insignias on flapping sombreros or flannel shirts. Riding out from the fort, they'd looked more like a band of desperados, or a cow town posse, than a detachment of United States cavalrymen.

Sergeant Grogan had explained this fact to the lieutenant the first day out. He'd been a little amazed when the detachment reported to him that hot August morning on the parade grounds. This was his first assignment, and the ways of a frontier post were still very strange.

"Them damn' Apaches," the sergeant said, "kin spot us a dozen miles away in uniforms. They hate troopers like all hell an' they'd treat 'em a lot worse than they would ordinary civilians fallin' into their hands."

Dennis Forbes had heard some of these weird tales at the post—captured white troopers being buried to their necks in sand and left for the vultures. Sometimes, their stomachs cut open and sand thrust into them. The Apaches had refined methods of torture, and they reserved the most pleasant for the troopers.

"Tana," Grogan was saying now, "didn't go up on that bluff when your dad was here, lieutenant. I think he figured on starvin' us out that time, or lettin' us just curl up an' die o' thirst. There ain't a drop o' water on this Mesa."

Dennis Forbes fancied he could hear the water trickling along the canyon floor eighty feet below them. It was a dead drop here, impossible to descend without a rope, and exposed all the way to Tana's guns. The eighty feet may have been eighty miles.

"What about that slope down which Tana went?" Dennis asked suddenly.

Sergeant Grogan's blue eyes swiveled to the five wounded men under the blankets.

"Tana has men down there," Grogan said. "It ain't likely he's forgettin' that your dad skipped out that way before." Grogan was saying more than that as he looked at the wounded. The five could never be taken out that way, and any plans they made had to include them. They were like five anchors holding down the boat.

CARBINES started to bang again, and Lieutenant Forbes coughed as choking powder smoke drifted in his direction. He saw two naked Apaches skim up among the rocks, moving with amazing agility, bullets spattering all around them. He'd seen Apaches on the reservations, and he'd despised them—short, unkempt men with lank black hair, most of them bow-legged, thin in body, wrapped in discarded white man's clothing.

Out here in their natural environment they looked different. Bright colored bandannas bound their hair; naked bronze skin glistened in the afternoon sun. Some of them wore breech clouts; some cartridge belts, and some nothing whatsoever!

Sergeant Grogan seemed to read the second lieutenant's mind.

"Once," he murmured, "I saw a buffalo bull in a corral. He'd been kept there five years an' fed hay. He looked like these chaps when they're on the reservation." The sergeant added dryly, "They're plenty tough now, lieutenant. Your dad said they were the toughest and the dirtiest fighters in the world; they're the trickiest lot o' devils this side o' hell!"

A bullet from the bluff hit a yard in front of Dennis Forbes' face, showering him with dirt. He spat out the dirt and crouched lower in the hollow, an oath forming on his lips again. He was not afraid; he was thankful for that, and he'd been a little fearful in the beginning that he would be under fire, but he had twenty-five lives under his care, and he was not a soldier.

With all his training at the Point, all the lectures he'd listened to, he could not now think of one clear plan. Only a natural soldier like his father reacted to such stimulus. Captain Roger Forbes would be concocting and rejecting one plan after another, deciding finally upon one which he would polish until it became foolproof. His escape from this same Mesa had been on that nature. There were no loopholes; every movement had been timed perfectly, and the wily Tana had been soundly whipped.

Sergeant Grogan who had been with the lieutenant's father busied himself buckling the belts together.

Night fell with amazing quickness in this high country. Quite suddenly the bluff and the ridges surrounding the Mesa became indistinct. They could see the flashes of fire from Apache guns, where before they had spotted the sharpshooters by puffs of white smoke.

The sweat dried on Second Lieutenant Forbes' dirt-streaked face. The distance across the hollow in which his command lay, was not more than twenty-five yards. He did not have to lift his voice to give the next command.

"Everybody shift positions," he called quietly. "They might take a few more shots at the spot where they last saw you."

A moment of silence followed this order, and then he heard the soft clatter of accouterments as the troopers rolled over and crawled to new positions. There were a few curses, muffled, wearied, not

at his order, but at their predicament. They were stiff, throats parched, dog-tired from the long climb up the Mesa after Tana.

Dennis Forbes rolled over and lay on his back, looking up into the night sky. The stars were getting brighter as the sky darkened. A chill breeze swept the Mesa. From the bluff and the ridges there were no more shots.

"No more trouble till mornin'," Sergeant Grogan muttered.

Dennis Forbes didn't say anything. They expected orders now; they were waiting for him to plan a way out of this. He was the trained soldier, but this sort of thing they didn't study in classroom. A man was supposed to use his own imagination.

A man groaned from underneath the blankets, and it was the first sound Dennis Forbes had heard from that direction. He raised himself on one elbow, and then crawled toward the wounded men.

Trooper Adams had taken an Apache bullet through the left knee, and was the least hurt of the five men. Forbes said to him quietly,

"Who was that, Adams?"

He heard a man clear his throat huskily.

"Coleman, sir," Adams said. "He got it through the middle." He paused and then added, "He's kind of dry, sir."

Dennis Forbes right hand came in contact with a water canteen. He held it up, shook it, heard no sound, and then placed it on the blanket again. That was his first problem.

IT WAS SO DARK now that he could not see his hand in front of his face. There was no moon, which was a blessing in itself. On a bright night no plan would have been feasible. The slightest movement on top of the Mesa would have been discernible to the sharp-eyed Apaches.

Second Lieutenant Forbes moistened his parched lips and said quietly,

"I need a volunteer to go for water."

There were no replies, and a faint smile crossed Dennis Forbes' face. Every man in the command would have been anxious to make the attempt, but they all knew where the water lay. A man had to be lowered down that sheer cliff to the canyon floor as it was utterly impossible to climb down.

Sergeant Grogan said from the darkness,

"We have no rope, sir."

Dennis Forbes sat up and rubbed his left leg. "Everybody strip off their belts," he ordered. "Go around and collect them, sergeant."

He heard the low chuckle from Grogan, and then a trooper murmured,

"Be a hell of a thing if we have to run without them belts."

Low laughter followed this, and it put a lump in Dennis Forbes' throat. Even Trooper Adams with the terribly-smashed knee had joined in it. These men were about to die!

Sergeant Grogan came up five minutes later with an armful of leather belts. Dennis Forbes had figured it out carefully. The drop to the canyon floor was about eighty feet, and possibly along the top of the Mesa they could find a spot where the drop was a few feet lower than that. With twenty-five army belts hooked together, all of them approximately a yard long, they would have a rope almost seventy-five feet in length. His own belt would provide the extra few feet necessary.

"Hell, sir," Grogan mumbled. "Trooper Ainsmith is wearin' suspenders!"

Dennis Forbes grinned. "We'll hang Trooper Ainsmith in the morning," he stated mildly, and again that ripple of laughter swept the little hollow. He wondered if Tana heard that, and if so, what the old Apache chief was thinking.

Grogan buckled together the twenty-five belts after the lieutenant had slipped out of his.

"Tie a stone to the end of it," Dennis Forbes told him, "and find the lowest drop to the floor."

Grogan disappeared, and then there was a movement off to the lieutenant's left. A man said softly,

"Reckon I'm the lightest man in the

detachment, sir. I'd like to get that water."

Others were speaking up now from the outer edges of the hollow. Dennis Forbes bit his lips and said to the man nearest him,

"How much do you weigh, Bailey?"

"One thirty-five."

"Go around and collect the canteens," Forbes told him. "Make sure you're not wearing anything that will make a noise on the cliff wall."

Sergeant Grogan came back, making small sounds in his throat.

"I figured less than seventy feet up past those red rocks, lieutenant," he said. "We'll have a few feet to spare."

Trooper Bailey came over with the canteens and one of them clanked against another. Other troopers were coming up now, walking upright, as the shooting had stopped entirely.

"Tie a jacket around those canteens and lower them first," Dennis Forbes said. He turned to Bailey. "Think you can climb down the rope?"

"Like a monkey, sir," Bailey said.

Dennis Forbes reached out and grasped his hand. "Good luck, Bailey," he murmured. He remembered little Bailey riding yesterday toward this Mesa, immediately before they'd sighted Tana and his decoys. Bailey had a nice voice, and he'd been singing softly, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

Grogan lowered the belt rope, standing at the edge of the cliff, letting the load of canteens down very slowly. Three men grasped the end of the rope and Trooper Bailey let himself over the edge.

DENNIS FORBES caught a glimpse of the man's face just before it disappeared. There were very good prospects that Bailey would not come back, and he knew it. Tana would have men down on the canyon floor, and it would be necessary to avoid them, find the stream, fill each canteen, and return to the rope. Even finding the hope in the darkness might be a problem—one Dennis had not considered until Bailey was out of sight.

No words were spoken, and Dennis Forbes watched the three men straining at the rope. Sergeant Grogan, nearest the edge, straightened up after a while and mopped his forehead with his hand.

"Boy's down," he muttered.

Second Lieutenant Forbes walked back a few paces, feeling the cold sweat break out all over his body. He saw Bailey creeping along the canyon floor, feeling his way in the darkness, dragging his bundle of water canteens, heart pounding every time he heard a sound. He waited for Bailey's scream, but he heard nothing. The wounded man with the hole in the stomach, groaned again.

With an effort Dennis Forbes got control of himself. He'd started to shake involuntarily. He had one thought in mind now. If he ever got out of this trap, he was resigning from the army. He'd been a fool to accept the appointment to the Point. He should have gone in for engineering.

He didn't know how much time passed. He could see the three men waiting at the edge of the cliff wall, dimly silhouetted against the night sky. Others crouched on the ground nearby, talking in low tones.

Sergeant Grogan came over then, and said huskily.

"It looks bad, lieutenant. The boy—"

A trooper was calling softly from the cliff and Grogan hurried back. Dennis Forbes went with him.

"Somebody tuggin' on the rope," the trooper murmured.

They hoisted the rope very slowly, inch by inch, taking an interminably long time. Then Grogan went down on his knees, got a firm grasp on something, and came up with it. A canteen clanged softly.

"Damn!" Grogan chuckled. He pulled the bundle of canteens over the edge and rapidly untied them. The belt rope was dropped again, and a few minutes later Trooper Bailey came up. He had one thing to say.

"Hot down there," Bailey panted. "No breeze."

(Continued on page 82)

ONCE A KILLER—

By
DALE BOYD

THE ways of absolute monarchs are often inscrutable—and always unquestionable—and surely King John Simon was absolute monarch of both Wingo Valley and the town of Wingo. The Bar W was the biggest holding in the valley, a rambling, feudal holding of many thousand acres surrounded on all sides by sections and half sections held by hoemen and farmers. King John Simon often spoke of these "little 'uns" as ticks on a blooded steer's back, and often threatened to brush them off completely.

As a matter of fact, during a long period of years he had done just that, applying pressure here and pressure there in such a manner that only the hardiest of these hoemen had been able

They had called him Wild Wes Warneke with reason, for he had been as tough as they come. And now that he was back from prison, tension ran through the valley, for he had in him the blood of the valley's tyrannical overlord, King John Simon. But when Wes broke loose, it was for unexpected reasons—and the results were thoroughly as unexpected as the grim cause!

* * *

Somehow she got him to his feet and over to her rig.

to stick it out, the others being absorbed by the Bar W. This wasn't hard to do, considering the fact that King John owned the Wingo National Bank as well as controlling interest in most of the mercantile establishments in the valley town. Those hoemen who had held on through sheer grit through all these years knew what it meant to borrow from the bank, or run their bills too high at the stores!

There had been a time, years ago, when King John scorned such paltry money methods and lived by the sword. Not more than ten years ago ruin had run riot in the valley. There'd been death and desolation, grim riders galloping, and destruction following gunsmoke. Then the miracle had occurred and King John's hardest gunhand, his own nephew Wild Wes Warneke, had gone to the peni-

tentiary in spite of all the money the King spent to save him! After that, Simon stuck to the slower and safer methods of getting rid of the hated ticks on the blooded steer's back.

When the carpenters put up the small but substantial building in a prominent spot on the main street of Wingo, no one, not even the carpenters, knew what King John had in mind, and no one dared ask. When the equipment, desks, and bookshelves and the box after box of books themselves arrived and were duly installed, curiosity ran high. Still, no one asked. King John Simon was that kind of cattle king. When he got around to telling things he told them—but not before.

It was sort of like his crippled right arm and twisted club foot. There to be seen by all, but God help any man, woman or child who stared at them, or spoke of them. He'd been known to quirt and fire a hand for trying to help him onto a horse.

SUE KILLIAN, whose folks owned a section next to the Bar W, and who taught in the little school at Wingo, was in Barney Weil's Emporium that Saturday morning when Mrs. Judge Coffey trotted in, breathless in excitement, to tell the news about the sign. Sue, too, left the Emporium to stand on the porch and gaze, startled and unbelieving, at the big sign being hung before the new building by the tobacco-chewing carpenter.

King John Simon and his foreman, black-browed, scowling Carlos Leeds, sat their horses in the dusty street and watch with expressionless faces. King John turned toward the townspeople, scowling, and said: "Hang it tight, damn you. It's there to stay." It was remarked, of course, to the workmen, but everybody watching from before the Emporium knew it was meant for the town of Wingo.

The sign read:

WESLEY SIMON WARNEKE
ATTORNEY-AT-LAW

When it was hung to his satisfaction, he nodded briefly, spat in the dust and pulled his horse's head viciously around in the direction of the nearest saloon. Carlos Leeds grinned at the watching crowd, rowelled his mare after his boss.

Old Barney Weil said, "I knew he'd been pardoned—he's been out about a year—but how come he's a lawyer?"

Oddly enough, Sue Killian found herself explaining that quite often men in the penitentiary put in their long hours studying something that would enable them to become useful citizens after their debt to society had been paid. Just as if she were explaining something in a precise, prim voice to her scholars.

Bledsoe, another section owner, laughed harshly. "Begging your pardon, Miss Sue, but I don't think you're quite old enough to remember Wild Warneke. Believe me, he's got no idea of being a useful citizen! And as for paying his debt to society—hell's bells, he could never pay his debt to Wingo Valley if he lived to be a hundred."

He turned and stomped off the porch. Someone called after him to ask where he was going. He answered, over his shoulder, "Home to break out my guns and oil them. Hell's coming back to this here valley and I aim to be ready. If you fellows are smart you'll be doing the same thing!"

The rest of them went back into the Emporium, their echoed indignation seeming to linger behind them like a smoke cloud. Sue Killian continued to stare at the overlarge sign.

Wesley Simon Warneke, she thought. She'd never heard his full real name before. As a matter of fact she'd been only eleven when Warneke was sent to the penitentiary, but all of her life, it seemed, she'd heard mothers quiet their children with a, "Hush! Hush! Wild Warneke will get you if you don't hush!"

She remembered him faintly, of course. A tall, lean, sunburned devil who was always laughing, always drinking and raising hell in general. She knew that every piece of deviltry that occurred in Wingo Valley from the time Wild Warneke was fifteen years old was laid at the daredevil's door.

UNCLE BOB COOK came out of the Emporium and hunkered down in the shade, attacking a can of peaches with a huge caseknife. He nodded a smiling, toothless good morning to Sue.

She came over close to him, said, "Uncle Bob, was Wild Warneke really as wild and as murderous as everybody says he was?"

Uncle Bob smacked his lips over half a peach, swallowed noisily and peered up at his questioner. "Reckon he was, Miss Sue. I know personally of five or six rannies he shot to death right here in town before he was twenty-one years old."

"And they didn't do anything to him? He got away with it?"

"Ma'am, it was sort of like this in those days: You had trouble with another fellow and instead of using your fists you just sort of shot it out. Both men going for their guns and the fastest man was in the right. He wasn't even tried for killing those fellows, and I reckon he shouldn't have been. No use penalizing a ranny because he can slap leather a little faster than the next one."

She couldn't have told why she was so curious. "But Uncle Bob, how does a man get to be so fast with a gun? How does—?"

Uncle Bob sighed and sat the peaches down. "First place, Miss Sue, a man has to have some cold nerve as well as natural ability. I reckon Wild got that from his mother. She was King John's sister, you know. She died when Wild was born, so King John sort of raised him—if you could call it raising."

"Where was his father? Didn't he—?"

"I was coming to that," reproved Uncle Bob. "His father was the easiest-going ranny that ever hit these parts. Too shiftless to be a good hand, but the finest gittar player and singer I ever heard. I reckon that's how come Miss Norma, King John's sister, married him. After she died, Marshall Warneke, he just sort of went to pieces. Took to drinking too much, and seemed like he never cared about the kid. Sort of like he blamed him for Miss Norma's death. Anyway King John took him to raise."

He shook tobacco in a brown paper and fashioned a cigarette. Sue was picturing a rather bewildered and sullen boy whose father hated him, who had no mother.

"King John was building up his holdings then, ma'am. Them was sort of cattle-war days and some of the slickest gunhands alive was working for him. King John had 'em teach Wild. Time Wild was twelve years old he'd strap a six-gun on and take a can just like this here, and toss it in the air and hit it five times before it hit the ground. Time he was fifteen he was riding with his uncle and his gunhands, walking right up to the bar and drinking with them like a man. Seemed like King John and all the other bad ones got a big kick out of seeing how mean they could make the kid. They'd sic him onto some of these overdressed drummers that used to come through. Yep, by the time Wild was seventeen he was already a killer and the fastest man with a gun in these here parts."

He peered about and lowered his voice. "Me, I ain't very smart, I don't know much of what's inside books. But I always figured King John deliberately made that boy into everything he'd like to be but couldn't, on account of his leg and his arm."

Sue nodded. She'd heard of such things, of course. Now she was digging back in her memory.

"Didn't he . . . well . . . sort of go berserk, Uncle Bob, and shoot up the whole valley?"

Uncle Bob answered, "Don't reckon I know what berserk means, but if it means what I think it means, he did. You see, there was a family named Wagner had a half section north of the Bar W and King John finally run them off, one way or other. Marshall Warneke had been missing a day or so and they found his body over at the Wagner's, drygulched, shot from behind, and hanging in the barn. The father hadn't been very much of a father to Wild, but Wild sort of went crazy. He rode right down the valley, Miss Sue, and he gave every nester and hoeman just twenty-four

hours to get under way. Your daddy would remember, even if you don't."

SUE did remember, faintly. Her father standing wide-legged in the front yard, a shotgun clutched across his chest, her mother trembling in the house, peering out the window and keeping her, Sue, well behind her. She remembered, now that Uncle Bob mentioned it. The slim youth swaying in the saddle of the big bay, his bleak eyes red-rimmed from too much drink, his right hand on his gun-butt. No, she couldn't recall the words, but she did remember, all too well, her mother's fright and her father's pale face and set jaw when he came back into the house after Wild Warneke had ridden away. And oddly enough she remembered the bloody flanks of the big bay where the spur rowels had raked him.

Uncle Bob continued, "And twenty-four hours later there was a lot of just what he promised—shooting and killing and burning. He didn't get your paw's place, for some reason or other. But he burned out plenty of others."

"How did they know he did it himself? How did they—?"

"He never denied it," said Uncle Bob. "Just by a miracle I reckon, a U. S. marshal came in quicklike, and hell started about it. They managed to put Wild on trial in spite of his uncle, King John, so they sent him up. He got life, too. Reckon it's King John's money and influence that got him paroled now. But I can't figure the wisdom of him coming back to Wingo Valley."

"Why not?" she demanded, a little startled at her own vehemence. "This is his home. If he made a mistake he's paid for it. He isn't a . . . a gunslick any more, he's a lawyer."

Uncle Bob picked up his peaches. "Once a gunslick, you can't quit. Too many other gunslicks wondering if they can beat you, if you're as good as your reputation. Besides, there's them here in the Valley that hold him no good will."

She started to say something else, thought better of it and turned away. Uncle Bob's words followed her. "Reckon he'll do all right in Wingo, howsomever. He'll get all the law business there is in the Valley." He cackled with laughter. "Folks'll be scared *not* to give it to him!"

THE town of Wingo was more than a little surprised at Wild Warneke's actions as well as his appearance. He didn't look as if his sentence had wrecked him or made him particularly bitter. True, he was ten years older and his complexion was strangely white in a country of sunbrowned men. He didn't seem ashamed. He stared steadily into the eyes of everyone he met, but there wasn't any challenge about the staring. They'd all expected him to come home with his six-gun thonged down, ready for action, and a chip always poised on his shoulder. Instead, he dressed in the garb of a city dude, wearing a black suit and a white shirt with a black string tie. If he carried a gun at all it certainly wasn't visible.

Sue heard several versions of his first little run-in with King John Simon. The rancher had naturally fixed up a room at the Bar W, and had expected Wild to live there and come to his office only when occasion required. Instead, Wild Warneke had put a partition in the new building, and slept there in the extra room he fixed up.

She heard, too, about his run-in with Bledsoe at the Stag Saloon. Bledsoe had meant exactly what he said the day the sign was put up over the new building in Wingo. He'd carried a gun since that day. He was not only a hard drinker but a hard hater, and his own brother had been one of those nesters burned out by young Wild Warneke some ten years before. Not that he was killed. He was merely so frightened that he'd left the country, selling his land to King John Simon for little or nothing.

Warneke walked into the Stag that evening, pausing for a second just inside the door to nod gravely and unsmilingly at the group of drinkers, his grey eyes level and steady. "Evening, gentlemen," he said. There were a couple of half answers to his greeting and the

Wes Warneke took care of Bledsoe with swift anger.

shadow of a smile played over his features. To the barman he said, "Rye, please."

He was just reaching for the glass when Bledsoe threw the contents of his own glass into the sawdust, and snarled, "You galoots do as you like, but I don't aim to drink with the murdering skunk!"

Warneke hesitated, then drained his glass and turned to face Bledsoe, who was advancing slowly toward him.

Bledsoe snarled, "Why don't you leave Wingo? Nobody wants you around here! You're scum in the eyes of all decent people!" His hand was on his gunbutt, the gun half out of the holster.

Warneke said levelly, "I don't want any trouble with you, Bledsoe. I'm a citizen, I'm doing a legitimate job." He refilled

his own glass, turned back to the raging drunk.

Bledsoe rasped, "You killer! You dry-gulcher! You burned out my own brother, damn you!"

"That's a lie, Bledsoe!"

EVERYONE in the house dived to get out of the range of fire. Few saw what happened. When no sound of shots came, only a heavy thud, they slowly stuck up their heads. Bledsoe was on the floor, cursing, just starting to sit up, wiping whiskey from his streaming face. Warneke, holding Bledsoe's gun by the barrel, was standing before him, staring down at him, his face whiter than ever. He slid the gun far down the bar.

"Bledsoe." His voice wasn't loud, but it was flat and deadly. "Bledsoe," he repeated, "and this goes for everyone else in this town that feels like you do; just get this in your thick head. I'm back to stay. If I owed you anything I've paid it, paid for all past mistakes, sweating it out in the pen. I promised myself when I came here that I'd never carry another gun. *Don't make me do it!* I was lucky, just now, I'll admit it. So were you. You drew on an unarmed man. I'm telling you again—all of you—*don't make me carry a gun!*"

Bledsoe, on his feet, was no coward. He snarled, "You're not fooling any of us, Wild Warneke, you and that uncle of yours. You were his top gunhand, you did his killing for him, and you're up to something or other again! I'm telling you for all of us that's hung on through all these years, that we won't be driven off and we won't be lawed off! Wingo Valley is our home and no land-hungry old cripple-brained land vulture is going to run us off."

Warneke shrugged. "I'm doing a little law business for my uncle. It has nothing to do with the Valley and there's nothing we're up to!"

"Like hell! Why'd he spend all the money getting you, a killer doing a life sentence, a parole? Why'd—"

"He's my uncle, my own flesh and blood. I think I've listened to about enough from you now, Bledsoe. Just don't forget what I told you." He wheeled and went out the door, leaving a babble of excited talk behind him. . . .

YES, Sue Killian heard the story as did a lot of others, except Sue heard it from Uncle Bob, who, she suspected, had a soft spot in his heart for Wild Warneke. The story thrilled her, some way. A man bucking a drawn gun with a glass of whiskey. But his warning not to make him carry a six-shooter chilled her, too. She could picture him staring at that group, his lips thinned, his eyes narrowed. Somehow she wondered if his words were a warning or—a plea?

Uncle Bob went on, "And after he left there was a lot of chittering and chattering like a bunch of old hens, some of 'em claiming they ought to run him out of town before he does start something, and Bledsoe swearing and be-damning if he wouldn't get him sooner or later. But Sue, I been thinking. I knew that young rapscallion all the time he was growing up, and wild as he was I never knowed him to tell a lie. But when Bledsoe accused him of burning out Bledsoe's brother, Wild threw the lie in his teeth. Funny business."

She didn't see exactly what he meant, at first. "Wild was always a ranny to meet a fellow in a fair fight. He wasn't no burner, no ranny to lay out in the bushes and shoot up a house where there was women and children. A mighty hard crew was riding for the Bar W then."

Before she could ask a question, the old codger chuckled and went on. "I was down at his office the other day having a little snort with him, and his uncle, King John, rode up and lit. I sort of stepped in the backroom where he sleeps and, well—I couldn't help but hear the argument. King John got right put out. Said Wild was an ungrateful whelp and all that."

"Why? I don't understand, Uncle Bob."

"Well, sir, I reckon the King never will get over his hankering for owning the whole valley. He said maybe he could

fix it up so a few flaws could be found in some of the titles and Wild could file against them in his name. Wild, he just sort of laughed at him and allowed he wasn't doing that kind of lawing for no man. Yes, sir, King John got right mad at that, reminded Wild that a damned nester had gulched his dad and hanged him high as Haman, but Wild, he just said two wrongs didn't make a right. Wonder what folks'd say around here if I told them that?"

"Somebody ought to tell them, ought to tell every one of them," she flared.

"Saw something else back in his sleeping room, too," cackled Uncle Bob. "Remember that picture of you they had in the paper when you come home from back in Kansas City?" Her eyes were wide now. "Well, Wild has got three of them, all cut out and pasted on cardboard and tacked on his wall! Yes, ma'am, three. All of *you!*"

She felt the red coming to her cheeks, protested that she had never spoken to the man since his return. Nevertheless the information, for some reason, made her feel mighty good.

FROM then on, on those few occasions when she met him on the street, she deliberately smiled and nodded at him, and though he never ventured to speak, there was something about the way his eyes lit up at sight of her, in the way he lifted his hat, that really pleased her.

He is the loneliest man I have ever seen, she often told herself. And she made up her mind that the very first chance she got she was going to defy the town and stop him, talk to him. The opportunity presented itself sooner than she expected.

Sunday afternoons she often drove her rig a half mile or so north of Wingo to the little cemetery where her mother was buried. She was late on this particular Sunday and the sun had already dropped down behind the San Sabas, though the western sky was still orange with the last rays. She put the fresh flowers on her mother's grave, said a few words of prayers and was almost ready

She beat at him with her hands. "Damn you, you'll ruin us all — except the Bar W!"

to leave before she noticed him. He had been sitting on a headstone opposite twin graves, and arising, was momentarily as surprised as she.

"Why, Mr. Warneke," she managed, feeling the blood surge into her cheeks.

He lifted his hat gravely, took a quick step toward her, then turned away. Somehow or other she found herself running after him, calling his name. He turned again, surprised.

"I've . . . I've been wanting to talk to you a long time," she blurted, "but you always seem to want to avoid me."

His smile wasn't very pleasant. "Ma'am, I appreciate it. I have avoided you, true enough. After all it wouldn't do your reputation any good to be friendly with me. You know who and what I am."

There wasn't a trace of bitterness in his voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

"You're wrong and mistaken!" she cried. "That's where you're making your biggest mistake in Wingo—avoiding people, walking stiff-necked around them."

"What should I do? Go around begging everybody's pardon for having misspent my youth? I don't think so, Miss Killian. This is home to me; my mom and pop are buried right there. I make a living here, they give me their law business and they can't run me out. But I'll never have friends in Wingo, I know that."

"But you've paid whatever you owed," she snapped. "There are fair-minded people in Wingo who realize that. They're not all Bledsoes."

He looked at her curiously and again she flushed. "You know about that Bledsoe business?"

"Who doesn't? And surely you'd have been justified in killing him! He drew on you!"

"When I put on a gun, Miss Killian," he said grinning, "I'll be aiming to use it. I don't need it with the Bledsoes. And now I'll have to tell you good day. My horse is over in the grove."

Again he lifted his hat, again he wheeled and walked away from her, leaving her biting her lip in vexation. Though for the life of her she could not have said what she expected or wanted of him. Before he made the little grove she tossed her head and started toward her rig, was almost there when she heard the sound of the shot.

She turned just in time to see him reel backward as if slapped by a giant hand, saw him stumble and collapse into the rich grass.

SOMEHOW she got to him, had his bleeding head in her arms before she even so much as gazed at the grove where his horse was tied. Then and then only did she catch the diminishing sound of galloping hoofs. There was, she knew, a little stream in the grove. He wasn't dead, but there was a deep furrow ploughed across his head where the bullet had creased him. She snatched his hat from the ground where it had fallen and sped toward the stream. Coming back, the gleam of metal caught her eye. Something made her pause and pick up the ejected shell. Then she sped back to Warneke.

When he opened his eyes, dazedly, she had torn the hem from her frilly petticoat and tied a wet compress on the wound, but he was still bleeding profusely. Somehow she got his arm about her shoulders, somehow got him to his feet and over to the rig. He was almost unconscious, but he remembered his horse. Obediently she ran for the mare, tied her to the back of the rig and set out for Wingo town in what threatened to turn into a wild gallop.

She found herself whipping the horse, crying aloud, "Hurry! Hurry! He can't die, I won't let him die!"

Good fortune put Uncle Bob Cook at his usual place on the porch of the Emporium. Together they got Warneke out of the rig and onto his own bed in the near room of his office. While Uncle Bob trotted away for a doctor she gazed around the clean little room, saw the three pictures of herself as Uncle Bob had described them. She turned back to the wounded man on the bed, an odd glow in her eyes. His face was paler than ever, his breathing labored. She wiped away the blood that was oozing from the bandaged crease.

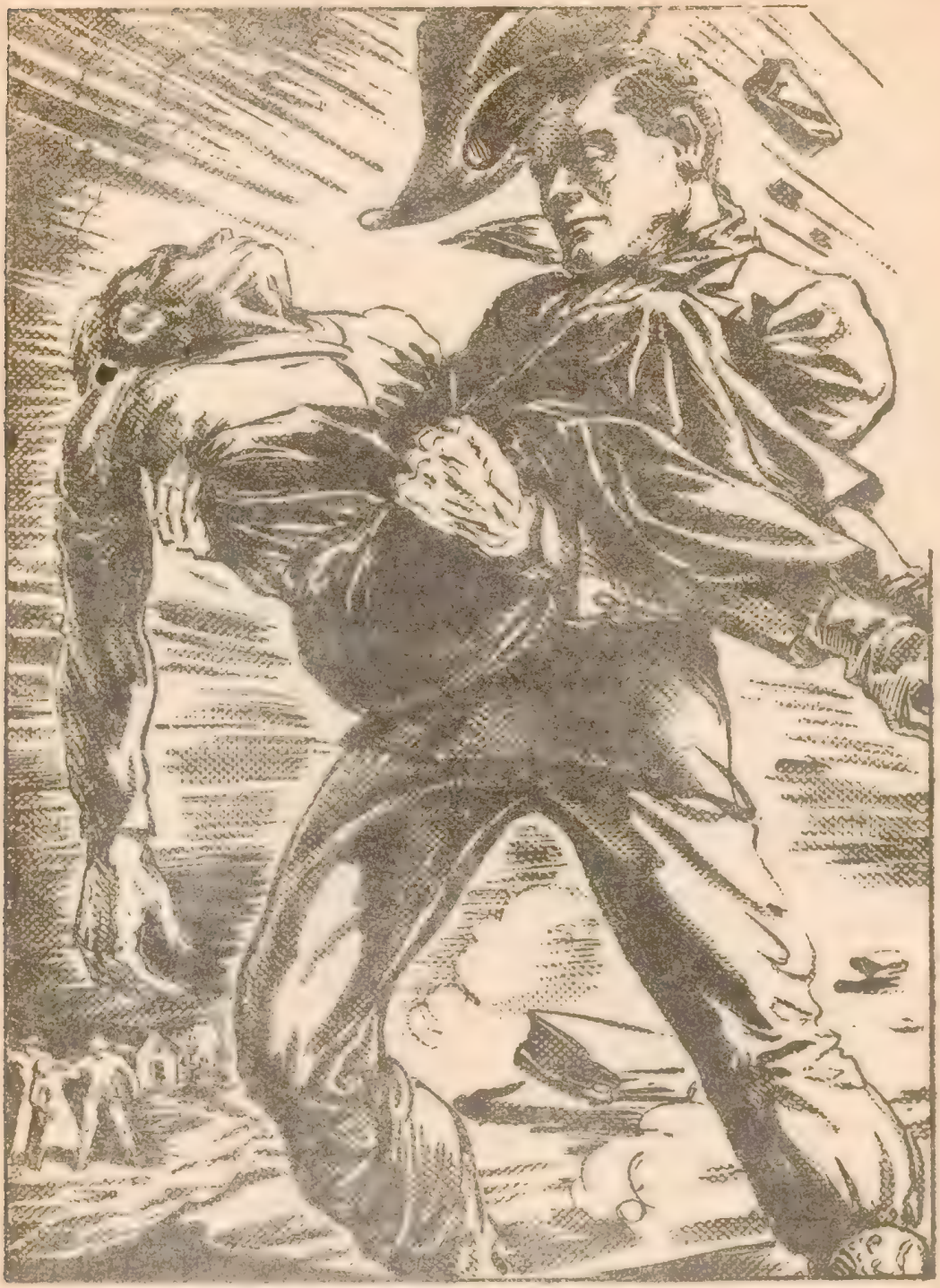
Uncle Bob came back, followed by the wizened doctor. As the doctor went to work, Uncle Bob whispered, "King John's in town. I had to tell him. He'll be here any minute."

She threw up her chin defiantly. No one, not even King John Simon, could drive her away now.

Shortly King John limped into the room, scowling darkly when he saw her, demanding what the hell she was doing here. She explained with dignity just what had happened at the cemetery. And almost at the same time, Warneke's eyes opened again. He looked from face to face until he saw her. Then and then only did he smile, reaching for her hand.

King John began to swear. He swore at nesters and hoemen individually and collectively. "Now," he raged, "you young fool, will you strap on that gun of yours? I told you they meant to get you. They got your poor old dad and they'll get you, too!"

Warneke grinned. "Reckon it'll take a little more than attempted drygulching to make me break my promise to myself. Now if you'll all go on and leave me alone maybe I can get some rest. Mind staying a few minutes, Miss Killian? I want to thank you."



As all hell broke loose behind him, Wes staggered from the dam with that body held in his arms.

Somehow, under all their searching eyes, she couldn't make herself do it. She pleaded an engagement, promised to drop back the next day and left. Outside she remembered the empty cartridge and gave it to Uncle Bob. He examined it carefully.

"Ummmm," he said. "A thirty-caliber

and most everybody's got one around here."

"Bledsoe?" she asked.

He nodded. "Lookee here, though. See how far off-center that firing pin is? Might be I can find out something or other."

SHE saw him twice during the next week, the latter time at the schoolhouse. He thanked her gravely for saving his life and told her he was going to Austin for three weeks to take care of some legal business for his uncle. He was gone before she could say half the things that were in her mind.

Three things occurred while he was gone. First, King John Simon quarreled viciously with old and wrinkled Refugio Frios who had been housekeeper at the Bar W as long as anyone in Wingo could remember. Refugio it was who had given Wild Warneke what little mothering he had ever had. She moved to Wingo, into the house of her daughter and son-in-law, who worked on the section.

Second, a great amount of cement, sand and cut lumber arrived and was hauled out to the Bar W ranch.

And third, the law office of Wesley Simon Warneke burned to the ground on the night before his return.

Sue Killian was there when he arrived, to stand white-faced and grim-lipped before the still-smoking ruins of everything he could call his own. He didn't say a word, he didn't even speak to her. He walked stiff-legged up to the hotel and tossed in his bag, made for the livery stable and saddled his mare.

She was standing at he window of the schoolhouse when he rode back into town. Horror swept over her when she saw the carbine riding so grimly in the saddle boot, glimpsed the heavy six-gun holstered at his thigh. Somehow she got her bonnet and ran from the empty schoolhouse, gained the head of the street in time to see him fling off the horse and stalk into the Stag Saloon. She flew down the hill toward the saloon, but before she reached it, he was out again and in the saddle cantering away. Uncle Bob had to tell her what had happened.

A full dozen townsmen and nesters were at the bar when he entered and all looked up, surprised, and more than a little frightened at what they saw. Bledsoe was there, and it was to Bledsoe that Wild Warneke spoke.

Warneke said, "All right, gents, this it it. I paid off ten years of my life for doing the things a wild kid will do. I figured it was all wrong, that the straight way was the best way, and I promised myself I'd never talk with old Judge Colt again. I came back here aiming to play fair and straight with everybody. You hopped me, Bledsoe; you said once a killer always a killer. One of you tried to gulch me out at the cemetery and I still didn't buckle my smokepole on. But you burned me out while I was away. You sneaked behind my back and did that, burned out everything I held dear."

There wasn't a sound in the bar.

"I've been accused of doing a lot of thing I never did," he went on grimly, "and like a fool I took those accusations, thinking it made me a man to do it. But a man might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. Maybe I wasn't cut out to be a lawyer, to ride the straight and narrow. Maybe you're right, Bledsoe. Once a killer always a killer. You want to try now Bledsoe? We're both rodded."

Bledsoe shook his head slowly. "*I* didn't shoot at you, Wild. *I* didn't burn you out."

"Then pass the word. All of you, damn you! I'm a land man, I'm a rancher, and I'm reverting to type. I've got no use for hoemen. If any of you, *any of you*, cross my path, you're bucking lead."

TWO WEEKS PASSED, and the school closed. Wingo Valley burned and blistered in the worst drought it had suffered for fifty years. Wingo Creek was down to a bare trickle of brownish water. The hoemen's crops, always irrigated, were drying badly through lack of water. And Sue Killian would not believe the rumors she heard. When Wild Warneke finally rode into town with

Carlos Leeds and the other Bar W hands on payday, she deliberately stopped him on the street.

"Wes"—somehow that first name slipped out—"I've got to talk to you. You've got to listen to me."

His eyes softened as he looked at the anxious oval of her upturned face. But he looked swiftly away, saying, "I'm sorry, Sue. It's a little late for that. I've made up my mind. God knows I tried to do it the right way."

"But surely, Wes," her hand was on his arm now, "you're not going to let your uncle go through with that dam? As dry as it's been everybody below him will be ruined if he dams Wingo Creek. They'll be wiped out, do you hear?"

His smile was twisted. "He can dam the creek if he likes. He has riparian rights like anyone else. The drought hurts us, too. We've got plenty of cattle dying right now. Of course," his voice grew edged, "the people below can get an injunction if they like."

"Damn you," she cried, beating at him now. "Don't you think I ever had any schooling? You're a lawyer! They'll file an injunction in a court your uncle owns, lock, stock and barrel. You'll file a counter injunction, and by the time it's settled everything in the valley will be burned up. All of us, every one of us but the Bar W will be ruined. Is that what you want?"

He said, "I'm afraid that's what I want." He left her standing there and hardheeled back into the saloon. . . .

Work went on at the dam. The hoemen and small owners held a meeting in the empty schoolhouse, which Sue attended with her father. She told them just how an injunction would work. It was Bledsoe who said, slowly, "It looks like fight, gentlemen. We've held on here against King John for a full twenty years. I'm willing to fight for what I've got."

She left then, so they couldn't see the tears streaming down her face. She was thinking of Bledsoe's words: *Once a killer always a killer.* "No! No!" she said fiercely to herself. "He isn't bad, he's just the product of his environment! He tried to do right and they wouldn't let him. Something's got to happen!"

NEXT DAY a squat Mexican knocked on her door and made a strange request. Twenty minutes later, wondering what it was all about, she was in an adobe hut leaning over the twisted figure of an old Mexican woman, Refugio Frios. The old woman, dying, was still bright-eyed, was still able to smile at Sue.

"*So, si,* you are very beautiful, *corazon,* just as he has told me! You will make him a good woman and bear him many sons."

Sue's senses swam until at last she realized that this was the woman who had played the role of mother to Wesley Warneke. That it was Wes who had told the old woman that she, Sue herself, was beautiful. That he wanted to marry her.

"Once," the old woman went on, a little bitterly, "I was beautiful, too, and many men desired me. I made a mistake, I went with a bad one, and now that I am old and ugly and of no more use to him, he has cast me aside. The devil!"

Sue recalled how there'd always been talk that Refugio in her younger days had been more than a mere housekeeper to King John Simon.

"Listen, *paloma.*" A clawlike hand clutched Sue's arm. "You must take care of Wesley. He is not bad, he is not evil. All that he ever did he was sent into by his uncle. Always that devil wanted land and more land. Listen to me, but close! When the time came and Wesley's father was killed, do you think it was those Wagners that killed him? *Corazon,* listen to an old one who knows."

Half an hour later, still appalled at what she had heard, Sue Killian left the adobe. Tucked into her bodice was a painstakingly scrawled note in Spanish, signed with Refugio's name.

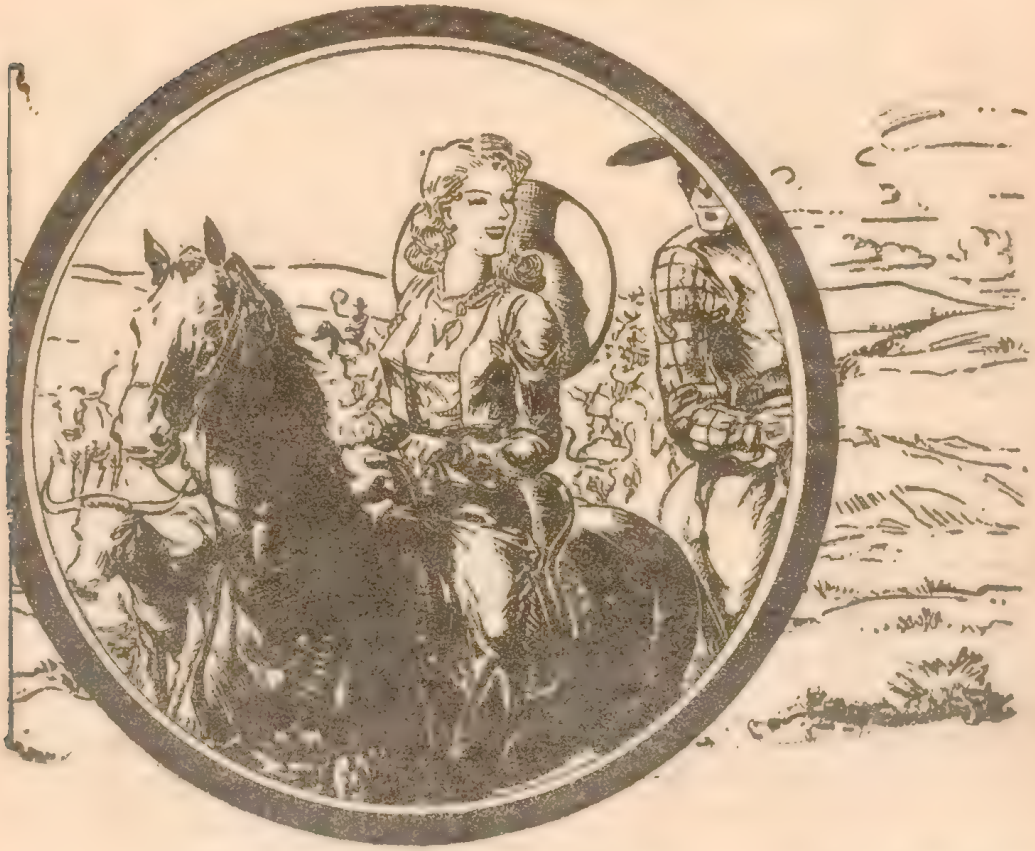
"Give it to him, he should know," the old lady had said, weary with her efforts. "And he will also know that in death Refugio doesn't lie."

Down on the main street Sue heard her name called, turned to see Uncle Bob

(Continued on page 87)

The Red Rogue's Man

By M. HOWARD LANE



CHAPTER I

The Mark of Cain

CAMERON LACEY sat his bright bay on a high point bordering the Chisholm and watched the trail-herd winding up from Texas. It was a big one, strung out for more than a mile across the flats beyond the Red, and Cam Lacey thought with some relish that this was just the size herd the Red Rogue liked to split.

He lifted the long spy-glass tucked under his arm, and admired momentarily the silken sheen of the metal shining under the rays of the mid-afternoon sun. The sight reminded him that, oddly enough, the telescope had been one of the chief things that had made him the Red Rogue's man.

He remembered that day quite clearly. Remembered back even farther to the time in Galveston Bay when he'd decided to leave his father's ship and see what it felt like to travel on dry land for awhile. "Captain," Cam had called his father captain almost since he could remember, "I'm tired of smelling the stinkin' hides we pick up at the packeries along this coast. These Texans ain't always going to drive their cattle here for slaughter. I've heard the railroad's coming to Kansas, and that a man named Jesse Chisholm has blazed a trail from a place called Abilene down to the Red

Cam Lacey thought that once he started to ride the owlhoot he couldn't swing back to the right side of the trail. But Joan Cartright was a pretty girl, and she had a convincing manner

He fitted the glass to his eye. A girl jumped across his field of vision.

River. With a trail they can drive cattle over, these Texicans are going to start rolling their herds north to railhead and the Kansas prairies. They'll get a heap sight more for their beef in Abilene than the packeries will pay 'em here, which means the end of your trade. Besides, I got a hankerin' to sleep on dry land."

"Ye'll be leaving the sea for good, son," Captain Lacey had remarked, "and I will not say I blame you. Texas is a fine State, and a man can grow with it. I've taught ye all you need to know, and you're handy with a dirk, or one of these new-fangled revolving six-shooters, so I guess ye'll make out." He'd reached behind him then to the cabin top, and brought his own telescope into his hands. "And jist so ye won't forget your dad," he'd added awkwardly, "or the ways of the sea complete, I want you to take this glass with you on your travels. Folded it'll fit a saddlebag, and stretched out it'll show ye things denied the eyes of most men. Ye

will find it a comfort, I'm thinking, and maybe an advantage if ye ride through country where the red Injuns lurk."

And now as he looked at the telescope, Cam thought that he had indeed found it a comfort. A companion on lonesome nights, and a thing of wonder to the Texas trail-boss he'd hitched up with for his first long ride to Abilene.

Afterwards, with money jingling in his pocket, and the good bright bay beneath him, Cam had started a lazy ride back toward Texas, and nearing the dark Nations that bordered the Chisholm he'd ran smack into a thunderstorm. Forked lightning split the fat black clouds, and it had really been quite a show to watch until the whole world exploded in one fantastic burst of fire.

CAM had come awake in a huge, log room to view an inquiring ring of faces. He'd watched a grin split the bearded lips of one black-eyed hellion, and through the humming that was still in his ears he'd heard the man say:

"Go and tell the Rogue, one of you fellers, that the younker's done woke up. Tell him the kid has got the brand of Cain on his forehead, and I misdoubt if it'll ever vanish. He's son to the Devil now, for nobody but Satan could save a gent and a bronc struck by lightning. Likely enough that telyscope stickin' out of his saddle bag attracted the fire. Ye can tell the Rogue also that the telyscope will come in right handy when the kid gets on his feet enough to use it. Right handy for spottin' herds comin' up out of Texas—"

That talk hadn't had much meaning to a man rousing from unconsciousness, but Cam Lacey had turned his head enough to watch one of the other men in the room walk toward a great stone fireplace set in the side wall. At first it looked like he was going to step right into the simmering coals on the grate, then he touched one stone above the wide mantel, and Cam had watched it swing open on invisible hinges. The man had put his face to the hole behind the rock, and faithfully parroted the first old hellion's summary to some one inside.

"Long-neck Jim," he said, "wants for you to know—"

And Cam, the effort just too much for him had closed his eyes and natural sleep had claimed him. He awoke the next morning filled with a raging hunger, and black-eyed, Long-neck Jim Brannigan had a brimming bowl of broth with meat floating through its richness to tempt him.

"Eat hearty, son," he'd chuckled. "That's good Texas beef and it didn't cost the Rogue nor airy one of us a plugged centavo. Fact is we made money on the deal. Trust that to the Rogue!" He'd explained his remark freely, as though already talking to a *compadre*. "Yuh see there's a heap of herds comin' up the Chisholm these days, but it's only the big ones that make us any profit, on account of guardin' a sizable herd is tougher than night-hawkin' a leetle one."

"Rustling?" Cam had found the word heavy on his lips.

"Hell'n'damnation no!" Long-neck had ejaculated. "The Rogue don't go in for anything crude as stealin'. Ain't no dinero in that less'n you take a hull herd and drive it to Abilene for sale, and them Kansas brand inspectors at rail-head ain't got no sense of humor. A trail-boss has to show papers provin' ownership, or land in the jug. Howsomever, the Rogue may even figger out how to beat that shenanigan one of these days. He's a right clever hombre—"

"But what do you do here?" Cam remembered asking, for he found himself morbidly interested.

Long-neck Jim's black eyes sparkled. "Why we un's jest ride out alongside the Chisholm after a scout spots a herd, and wait until they bed down for the night. Come good dark, with most of the hands rolled in their ponchos, we un's cut the herd. Run off a coupla hundred haid and hold 'em back hyar in the forest in leetle bunches. Come mornin' I usually ride out and make a dicker with the trail-boss. He's almost always right glad to fork over a dollar per for every steer we drive back to his herd. No risk, no danger, and

a quick profit. That's the Rogue's motter—"

"The Red Rogue," Cam said slowly, and the name had a swing to it that sounded good against his tongue. "Seems funny he don't do his own bargainin' with the trail-bosses 'stead of you."

For the first time Long-neck Jim hesitated. "Well," he finally said, "it stacks up kinda this way, son. The Rogue comes to visit us in the night, and he always pulls out afore mornin'. There's a leanto behind the fireplace where he hangs his hat, and he gives us our orders and gits our reports through that hole in the fireplace. There ain't a man of us," he'd added with something like awe in his voice, "ever seen the Rogue. And there ain't a Texican trail-boss ever seen him either, but he's a right famous name here in the Nations, and along this strip of the Red. Why fer as we know he may be the most honest settler 'tween Jones Crossing and the Canadian—"

"That's the damndest yarn I've ever heard!" Cam remembered exclaiming. "It's nigh unbelievable."

He had watched Long-neck Jim's expression harden. "Believe it or not, boy, I'm speaking the truth, and there ain't many heard as much of it as you. So, iffen you mosey on out of here when you git on your feet keep your tongue in your cheek. Them as have ever done any talking about the Rogue usually end up dead!"

And Cam Lacey had done no moseying. He'd stayed in the big log outlaw house slowly regaining his strength, and after a first look at his face in the glass above the wash bench out back of the kitchen, he'd realized with something close to horror that he might never feel like leaving here again, for the brand of Cain looked back at him from the mirror. A vivid, V-shaped scar that ran jaggedly from the line of his black hair to the bridge of his nose. It made him look old, and it made him look ugly, and Cam was young enough and sensitive enough to let the sight of that horrible scar prey on his mind.

CHAPTER II

Herd for Abilene

HE was interviewed by the Red Rogue himself at the speaking tube that ran through the fireplace mantel. "You are free to go, or stay and join forces with us, amigo," the Rogue's voice had a deep resonancy that Cam figured he'd never forget. "If you go remember you have seen nothing here, nor heard anything. Forget that advice, and lead will be your reward. Stay here with us, and you will share and share alike with my men. More money than you'd ever make driving dogies up the trail to Abilene. In fact, I doubt if you could find a job. That scar is not a pretty sight—"

There were others in the Rogue's band who cunningly reminded him of the same thing. Cam stayed on. There was excitement and danger in breaking up a big trail-herd, and it wasn't exactly stealing, he comforted his New England conscience, because they always returned the beef save what they needed for food. On idle days there were wild turkeys to hunt, and furtive drifters who sometimes halted to rest and bring them news of the world beyond the Nations.

Thus the weeks had passed, with raid following raid, and the Red Rogue riding to collect his half share of loot from Long-neck Jim and listen to the reports of Shorty McGinnis on the look-out for Texas herds.

Then an evening had come when Shorty failed to return. And that night the Rogue paid them an unexpected visit, and talked to them all through the tube that connected his leanto with the big main room.

"Shorty," he told them grimly, "got too close to the Red and an advance rider for a big herd figured he was taking too much interest in their outfit and plugged him full of holes. The trail-bosses are starting to get wise to our little game and there's going to be more blood spilled unless we're careful. If they get too smart, and too tough we're done for; but I'm working on a little scheme that may put us all on easy street.

"Meantime, Lacey, you'll take over McGinnis' scout duty. You and that long brass telescope of yours. With it you can stay far enough back from the Red so that nobody can spot yuh, and likely see more'n Shorty ever did. Just remember, Lacey, that if you miscalculate the size of one crew the death of a lot of your *compadres* here will be on your head. So pick your outfits carefully!"

It was a position of trust. Cam felt his bitter heart swell. "Aye, aye, sir!" he said enthusiastically. "I won't let Long-neck down."

The Red Rogue had chuckled, then his voice gained an unexpected harshness. "You and your telescope, Lacey, may play a big part in setting the stage for our final party. Now, adios to you all—"

They'd heard his big black horse gallop off through the forest as though a strong wind was blowing it, and Long-neck Jim had slapped Cam on the back. "Son," he'd said, "it looks like you're the Rogue's man for sure now. He don't trust none but the best."

"I wonder what he figures for the pay-off?" Cam had asked through dry lips.

"We'll see, son, we'll see," Long-neck had commented. "The Rogue will tell us his plan when he's good and ready."

AND AFTER EACH spotting job, Cam had found himself waiting for the Red Rogue to speak again about the coup he planned, but more weeks ran on with nary another word from their chief, and now the season was drawing to a close. The crisp feel of Fall was in the air, and it wouldn't be long before snow hid the Chisholm.

Cam was thinking about that as he lifted his long telescope, and adjusted it to his eye with a practiced ease. Miles away, the herd and all its riders at point and swing and the pair leading the brown horde toward Jones Crossing leaped close to his eye. Unhurrying now, he studied the cattle first, and guessed the tally would equal three thousand. All longhorns, they were in prime shape, a steady herd that would bring top money from the buyers waiting at Abilene.

Moving his glass to the flanks, he counted riders at point and swing on both sides, and another pair in the dust of the drag. Behind the cavvy lumbered the chuck-wagon. Seven men in all, not counting that pair leading the trail-herd. They'd make the total nine.

Cam's wide, firm lips curled. He looked like a young wolf about to lick his chops. "Long-neck," he muttered out loud, "is going to be right glad to hear about this outfit!"

For the pickings lately had been lean. Too much word of the Red Rogue and his band had filtered back to Texas, and trail-bosses were getting smart enough to hire tough riders and plenty of them to guard their cattle past the Nations. But this outfit evidently hadn't heard of the Red Rogue because they didn't have an extra hand with them, unless you counted the stripling kid riding beside the trail-boss.

He turned his glass full on the leader of the herd, but it was the clear-cut miniature face of the stripling that jumped into his field of vision. The sight was a shock to him, and he took the 'scope from his eye, and looked at it almost distrustfully.

"A girl!" he said, and even the words felt rough against his lips, because it had been so long since he'd even thought of a woman. No man with a scar like the one branding his forehead had any right to ever think about women again. Any girl in her right mind would shudder at the sight of him, or try to show her pity, and that was the last thing Cam Lacey wanted. No, the company of men would have to be enough to suit him for the rest of his life.

"Get on back to camp and give Long-neck the news," he told himself sternly. "We'll clean up a scad on this outfit. Women be damned!"

But the bay didn't move, and Cam felt his boots resting stubbornly in the stirrup bows. He found his arms lifting the telescope of their own accord, and with wrath at his own foolishness simmering in him, he fitted the glass to his eye.

Again the girl jumped across his field

of vision, and now he could see that she had black hair. She'd tossed her hat back to let it hang by a lanyard string between her shoulders. Her face was oval, and from the way she was glancing at her companion, Cam could guess they were talking and laughing about something.

"They'll laugh out of the other corner of their mouths before we're done with them!" he grunted, and switched the glass to bear full on the girl's partner.

The man was tall and slat-thin, riding high and easy in the saddle as though he'd been born there. A gaunt old wolf of a man, trail-hardened, travel-wise. Arrogant, like all the Texans.

"Figure they're better'n most men," Cam thought. "Well he won't after the Rogue's men teach him a lesson!" His spurs hit the bright bay's flanks.

The bay moved at any easy lope across tawny prairie swales, heading with homing instinct toward the hidden opening at the forest's edge which would lead him to the secret trail they traveled to and from the big log house so cleverly masked in a deep coulee that a man could ride within ten yards of it and never see the structure.

Only the red tribesmen, the Government had settled here in this last territory they could call their own, and those on the dodge who sought shelter in this no-man's land could find their way to the Rogue's retreat. Cam had seen many of them come and go. Restless, unhappy, furtive men with a price on their heads, and no future they could call their own.

He wondered suddenly if that was to be his own future. "Hell," he told himself savagely as he parted brush and rode into the coulee where the big house lay, "seein' that danged girl has already started you thinkin' fool thoughts. The Rogue's promised us an end to this, ain't he? Promised us a haul that'll let us quit with dinero in our pockets."

That night, Cam and all the rest of the Rogue's men learned what that haul was to be, for their chief came in the night on his big black, and addressed them through the speaking tube when Long-neck Jim opened it.

The scar made him look old, made him look ugly.

"COMPADRES," the Rogue said, and there was ill-concealed excitement in his voice even before he told them the scheme that was in his mind, "things are coming to a head in nice shape. But first, let's hear your report, Lacey, on that Jack-knife herd that will be crossing the Red come morning."

Cam rose from the bench along the log wall across from the fireplace, and all the nerves and muscles in his tall, straight-limbed body felt taut as fiddle-strings. He stepped to the brown bear rug in front of the mantel and addressed that hole in the stone facing of the fireplace.

"Seems to me," he said, and his voice was filled with a harshness that he hadn't anticipated, "that you know more about that herd than me. Leastways my glass sure wasn't strong enough to read any brands."

A silence fraught with sudden tension filled the room, and Cam saw Long-neck's brow show puzzled furrows. Nobody in all this band had ever questioned the Rogue's word.

The man's voice was lower when he answered. "Lacey," he said softly, "I asked you for your report. Not comment! So please proceed."

Cam shrugged, and the effort seemed only to draw the skin tighter across his shoulders. He couldn't understand his own feelings, but he knew that for the first time since he'd joined this outfit they all looked like strangers to him, and the Red Rogue hiding his identity from his own men seemed like an insult.

"There ain't much to tell," he said meagerly. "I tally three thousand prime longhorns in that herd, and only a seven man crew to push 'em along. Seven men and—" he'd been about to add "girl", but the word stuck in his throat for the Red Rogue's pleased chuckle swelled through the big room.

"Compadres," he said, "the snow will fly soon, and this is the chance for which I have been waiting. We have been careful to kill none of the nighthawks in our trail raids, and so we have never become more than a nuisance— I planned it that way for a purpose. It has been my desire to foster the impression that we seek never to kill, and thus the efforts of trail crews to follow us have always been half-hearted.

"But this time, amigos, there will be no danger of pursuit for *we will wipe out the Jack-knife to the last man.* Their herd will travel to Abilene under the Red Rogue's banner, and by first snowfall you will all have enough dinero to weight your pockets for a long time to come. This is what I promised you—an end to outlawry. Your fate will be in your own hands after we disband in Abilene—"

He talks like some feller out of a book," Cam heard one of the Rogue's men mutter, then a humming, swelling roar filled his ears.

"You can't kill all them folks coming this way!" he heard himself shout hoarsely. "One of that bunch is a girl! I saw her with my 'scope."

"We can and will!" the Red Rogue's voice came through the tube like a whiplash. "But first, friend Lacey, we will see to it that her blood will not be on your hands. One more dead man will mean one less divvy to make in Abilene. Brannigan, take him—!"

CHAPTER III

Flight

CAM whirled, and he cursed the fact that the pair of long Colts that he'd had plenty of time to learn how to handle were looped on a wall-peg well beyond his reach.

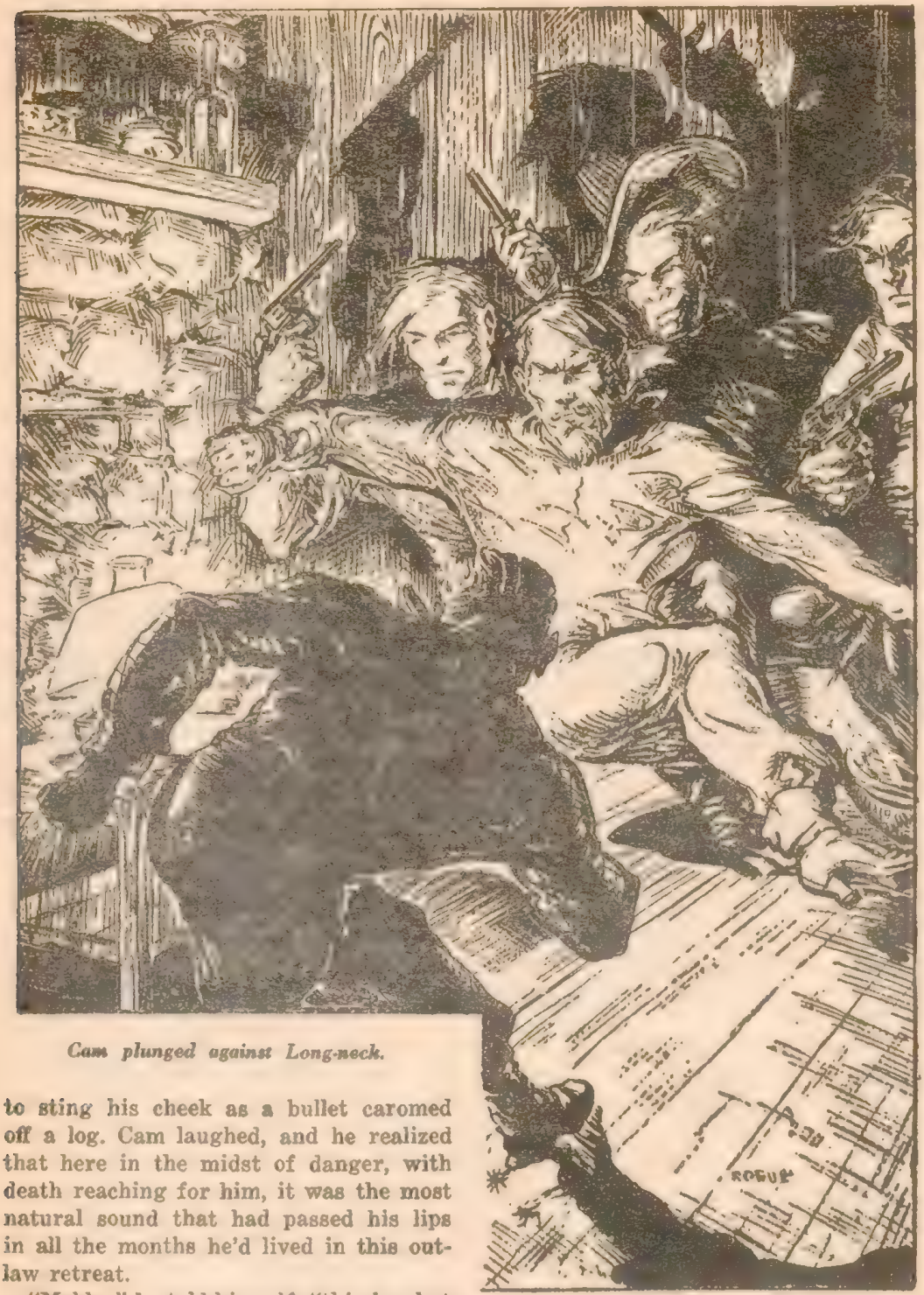
Long-neck Jim Brannigan was armed. It was said he even slept with those black Colts at his hips, and one of them was coming from leather as Cam launched himself toward the Rogue's foreman. All the friendly things they'd done together passed in flashing review before Cam Lacey's eyes. Long-neck Jim had been the one to find his rain-soaked body beside the Chisholm and bring him to this outlaw retreat, and he'd been the one to brew the rich broth that had brought him back to health. He'd taught him the art of tracking, and the gunmaster's code. They'd become friends—and now they were enemies.

Cam plunged against Long-neck, and was a little surprised that the outlaw hadn't cleared his Colt and filled him full of lead before this, but now was no time to count his luck for there were other loyal men of the Rogue grabbing for their guns as he felt the point of his shoulder drive the breath from Brannigan.

Long-neck plunged backward, arms and legs flying, and as he went down he carried three cursing Rogue men with him. The three, Cam had time to notice, who'd been the first to clear their Colts.

He made his long dive for the open door and the beckoning night beyond, and hasty lead tried to target his leaping shape. But above the Colt-roar, he could hear a voice booming curses. The Red Rogue was still in his small leanto room around back of the house, and the wild determination to meet their unknown leader became even more important than the thought of escape. If he could face the Red Rogue, get his hands on the man, death might drag them both down together.

On flying feet he rounded the near corner of the wall, and bark jumped out



Cam plunged against Long-neck.

to sting his cheek as a bullet caromed off a log. Cam laughed, and he realized that here in the midst of danger, with death reaching for him, it was the most natural sound that had passed his lips in all the months he'd lived in this outlaw retreat.

"Mebbe," he told himself, "this is what you've been needing to wake you up, you damned fool!"

And he knew something else at the same time. Three thousand cattle would be lost, and eight men and a girl would die unless he got away to warn them before they started that herd rolling across the Red. But even a warning would do no good as long as the Rogue waited, for sooner or later men had to close their eyes, and when they did the Rogue's wolves would ride over them.

It left only one alternative. "Got to get the Rogue!" Cam panted, and he turned another corner of the big house, and saw the shape of a tall black horse loom against the brush that came down close to the hind wall. The animal snorted, and jerked against his tether rope, showing wild alarm. Mane flying, the stallion jerked his head, and Cam had time to think that he'd never laid his eyes on a more beautiful horse.

Somewhere behind him he heard Long-neck Jim bellow savagely. "Hold back, you hombres. That young pup's mine!"

THE HEAVY PLANK door of the little leanto room that was always padlocked save when the Rogue visited them slammed open, and Cam saw a man leap toward the big black. He made his dive for the other's legs. His arms circled the Rogue's waist, and an up-driving knee caught him beneath the chin as they plunged down together. Bright stars clouded Cam's eyes, and he pawed out blindly with splayed fingers, and felt them mat in coarse, heavy hair. He drove the Rogue's face savagely into the soil, and clawed upward to his feet as he felt the other relax beneath him.

Boots pounded toward the corner he'd just rounded, and Long-neck Jim's howling curses came clearly to his ears. It was taking the lanky old owlhooter a long time to get in shooting range, Cam thought, as he jerked the stallion's reins free of the bush to which it had been tied. Leg up, he forked the saddle, and drove the black straight toward the slanting wall of the coulee.

Long-neck Jim's twin Colts boomed behind him, and Cam heard the snip-snip of bullets slicing brush on either side, but none of the lead came close enough to worry him, and he wondered bitterly if Satan was still protecting the man branded with the mark of Cain.

The black lurched over the rim of the coulee, and whirled like a swallow back toward the woods trail it ordinarily followed. Cam gave the animal free rein. The horse could see better than he in this heavy darkness, and besides all the excitement had started his head to aching. The scar on his forehead throbbed with every beat of his heart, and he realized that he'd forgotten all about that mark while he'd been making his rebellious run for freedom.

"Mebbe if you'd keep forgetting about it," he told himself acidly, "it'd go away, and then you wouldn't mind letting folks see you again."

Something tickled the palm of his left hand. Something seemed caught beneath the plain gold-band ring he wore on his third finger, and he freed it with his right hand, recognizing that it was hair. Hair from the Red Rogue's head, and he reached up slowly and stored the coarse lock in the breast pocket of his shirt.

Once out of the forest, Cam decided, he could risk striking a match and taking a look at the only sign by which he might recognize the Rogue if ever he met the man face to face.

On the edge of the prairie, he paused and scraped a Lucifer match across the leg of his pants. Sulphur flared sputteringly blue, then caught the match stick. By its small light, Cam saw the Red Rogue's hair was red as his name, coarse and curly.

"You'll know him if you see him," Cam told himself aloud. "And you better, amigo!"

HE PUT THE hair back in his pocket, and his hands fell unconsciously to empty thighs. He'd need guns on his hips before he met the Rogue, because death was going to be his reward for rebellion if the Rogue could manage it.

A wise man would point the black's nose north toward the Canadian, and leave those Texans face their own trouble, but even as the thought came to him, Cam's hand was swinging the stallion south toward the Red, and Jones Crossing.

Lights from the small settlement built up about Hoby Jones Station sprinkled the prairie. Cam counted at least a dozen lamp-lit soddies, and there were more where settler families had already gone

to sleep for the night. There were enough children here already, he'd heard, to make a school of sorts necessary. Some broken-down stage actor with a gift of gab, Long-neck Jim had told him, was the teacher in the little log and sod shanty behind the station.

Someday, Cam thought, there'd be more than a school and trading post here on the banks of the Red, if the Texas herds kept coming. But that time would not arrive until Law came to the prairies for keeps. A law that would hang men like the Rogue—"and me!"—the bitter words came to his lips as the black galloped effortlessly along the dusty ribbon of the Chisholm.

Yes, he'd been as bad as any of the Rogue's outlaw crew, Cam reflected, and there was no justification for his actions. "I could have left them when I got on my feet," he told himself grimly, "but I took the easy way."

He could have gone back to Texas, he could have ridden to Matamoras and joined the crew of any out-bound freighter. "But instead you wanted some excitement," Cam told himself honestly, "and the feel of gold in your pants. Well you ain't got either now. Not even as much as you had when they dragged you in like a drowned rat. You had trail-pay in your pocket then, and a telescope, and guns on your hips, and now you got nothin' but a stolen hoss and the shirt on your back!"

He had even less than that. He had the enmity of the Rogue, and that Nations leader, so Long-neck Jim Brannigan had told him, had never yet failed to kill a member who defied him.

Cam studied the scattering lights about Jones Station, and his lips curled. In one of those houses lived a man with coarse red hair, by day a respected settler, by night the notorious Red River Rogue.

"There'll be no peace along this strip," he found the words coming savagely, "until one of us is dead!"

And his final knowledge of that fact gave him a sort of grim confidence.

Her face was cameo clear in the firelight.

CHAPTER IV

For Jack-knife

THE sands of the Red were mirror-white, and the shrunken stream was a thread of silver through them as Cam guided the black toward the Texas shore.

Any observers in Jones Station, he thought bleakly, could spot him and the big black against the pale shine of the sands, and if they were men of the Rogue he'd get a report on his return to this outpost.

"He'll know every move I make come morning," Cam thought, but he did not change his course toward the lumpy blot on the opposite shore that was the Texas trail-herd. He was close enough now to hear the thin, melancholy singing of the night-hawks endlessly circling the bedded cattle and as the black lurched over the low bank fronting the herd, Cam spotted the canvas-tilted shape of the chuck wagon off to one side. Near it the hands had pitched the small tent which guarded the privacy of the girl accompanying this herd out of Texas.

And at the thought of her, and of the throbbing scar on his forehead, Cam Lacey felt his first panic. She would either laugh at him, or pity his disfigurement, and one would be as bad as the other. Thus, for the space of a minute, he fought his lonely battle, debating

whether or not he should whirl the black and race back across the river, and not stop until he saw the Canadian. But the decision was taken from him, and Cam was satisfied.

"Stand your hand, mister," a clear, old voice drawled from the thick darkness beneath the box of the chuck-wagon. "I've got a Betsy lined on your belt, and she shoots where I look!"

Cam halted the black obediently, and a weight seemed lifted suddenly from his heart. It was good to hear a voice that did not belong to one of the Rogue's men, or any of those furtive riders who made the Nations-house their temporary haven. Long-neck Jim, he reflected, was the only one of the tribe he missed, for that black-eyed old hellion had been the only man he could call a friend.

"Save your lead, mister," Cam said quietly. "My name is Lacey, and I've come to make talk with you, nothin' more."

A gangling figure crawled from beneath the chuck-wagon and unkinked to full height. Faint starlight gilded the barrel of the rifle tucked under one arm.

"I'm Hank Parsons," he said in a slow Texas drawl that sounded lazy as the murmur of the water in the Red, "and I'm ramrod of this Jack-knife out-

Cam mounted the Red Rogue's black with a singing in his heart.

fit. But don't go speaking your piece, Lacey, until I rouse Miss Joan. She's the last of the Cartrights, and this herd is wearing her iron.

"Climb down and rest your bones while I wake her. Whitey," he spoke to a man grunting profanely in his blankets beneath the wagon, "git movin' and stir up the fire. Set a pot of coffee on the hook, and break that private bottle of mine outa your chuck box. This danged weather brings the misery into a man's bones, and nothin' drives it out like a good slug of red-eye."

"The misery," said the cook acidly, "must started attackin' you twenty year ago then. All right, I'll do it, but so help me, I'm goin' to quit this outfit in Abilene!"

"He's been goin' to do that," Hank Parsons said dryly, "ever since he come to work for the Jack-knife thutty year ago—"

The flap of the tent opened, and a tousled black head peered out. "How is a lady going to get her beauty sleep with all this caterwaulin' out here?" Joan Cartright demanded.

"We got a visitor, ma'am," Parsons said, "and men don't come sashayin' out this time o' night less'n they got somethin' on their minds. Mebbe you'd like to slip on a wrapper and come jine us in a cup of coffee."

"While you and said visitor lap up whisky!" the girl chuckled. "All right, I'll be out, Hank."

Cam listened to the friendly talk of these three, and he realized it was something he had been missing since he'd left his father's ship. In that big house in the Nations there'd always been the snarling of men tensed to the breaking point. Different from here, where laughter and raillery and a sense of well-being seemed to emanate from those Jack-knife folks. And they were all marked to die!

"LISTEN," CAM BLURTED as he dismounted and strode into the circle of light cast by the cook's fire, "you're heading straight into trouble if you drive this herd across the Red—"

Hank Parsons had hunkered down beside the rising fire, and light showed all the flat planes of his leathery cheeks, and the strong back of his big nose as he turned his head to survey the equally tall young fellow who had come within the lighted radius.

"Simmer down, son," he drawled. "There ain't never been anything quite as bad as she looks."

"But—" Cam began.

"We've got to drive in the mornin' and keep movin'," Parsons said placidly, "or snow will catch us before we reach the Canadian. A late herd like this will bring top price amongst the grangers flockin' into Kansas, and we've got to make that market, or the Jack-knife folds her blade for keeps."

The girl had come from her tent to stand muffled in a long robe, and Cam was conscious of her eyes studying his thin, beard-stubbled face. He fancied that she was paying particular attention to that livid scar on his forehead, but for once it made no difference.

"You've got to hole up here," he told Hank Parsons earnestly, "until the Red Rogue's wiped out. He's aimin' to raid your camp once you get beyond Jones Crossing, take over your herd, and drive it into Abilene posing as the owner and his crew. That's what I come to tell you."

"You're sure you are not one of the Rogue's men?" Joan Cartright asked, "here to convince us that safety lies on this side of the Red. It would be simple for him to strike a herd held up on these bed-grounds."

Cam swung his head toward her, and he gave not a damn now for the scar that disfigured him. Her face was cameo clear in the firelight, oval-shaped, strong. "If you think that, ma'am," he said furiously. "I'll be riding!"

"Haste," Hank Parsons drawled, "usually makes waste. Let's hear what you know, amigo."

An odd feeling built up in Cam Lacey. It was the way he'd felt as a boy on coming home after playing hookey from school. Kind of ashamed, but good just the same. He opened his mouth and the words came in a quick rush—more of them than he'd expected to speak, for before he was done he'd told them about leaving his father's ship, and about the telescope that had likely attracted the lightning, and about walking in the log house in the Nations. He told them of countless raids, and of the Rogue's plan to wait for the right herd to take as the pay-off. He told them that not one of the Rogue's outlaw crew had ever met their leader face to face—

"But I've got something that'll let me know him," Cam concluded, and he brought the lock of hair from his pocket. In the firelight it glowed red as the Rogue's name. "They's a couple dozen settlers taking up homesteads round and about Jones Station," he went on, "and the Rogue's one of them people by day. He learns more thataway than by being on the outside like us in his crew."

"That sounds straight," Hank Parsons nodded agreement. "And so does your story, Lacey. You ain't the first young fellow to ride the owlhoot for a spell, then step back to the right side of the trail. Wouldn't be surprised but what I mighta done it myself oncet a long time ago," he went on reflectively. "Nope, I wouldn't be surprised. But sittin' here and gabbin' won't put the Jack-knife in Kansas."

"We've got to go on, Mr. Lacey!" Joan Cartright said simply.

Cam climbed to his feet. "But ma'am," he said with equal simplicity, "you cain't. Not until the Red Rogue's dead. The seven men you got are no match for the trail wolves in his outfit."

"What's your suggestion?" Parsons asked gently.

Cam breathed deep, and he felt his blood start to pound recklessly through his body. "Give me a pair of guns," he said, "and I'll show you. The Rogue ain't ever let a man leave his outfit and live. I'm marked to die, but I'm goin'

Cam went toward them with the heavy telescope.

to try and take him with me. Then yuh can make your drive in peace—"

He watched Hank Parsons turn his hatchet face toward the girl, and for a moment they seemed to carry on a wordless conversation, then the old-timer's eye swung back to Cam.

"Son," he said gently, "four guns are

always better'n two. I think I'll ride back across the Red with you."

THERE WAS NOTHING Cam Lacey could say. He felt a lump rise in his throat, and the best he could do was lick dry lips. His eyes touched Joan Cartright, and the girl was smiling and nodding her approval. She didn't seem to mind looking at him, Cam realized, and then he decided that the scar didn't show much in firelight.

"Ma'am," he said hesitantly, "I sure hope you hit a high market in Abilene. Don't go waitin' up for Mr. Parsons here. We may be across the river for quite some spell."

The girl's laughter was genuine. "I've never waited up for Hank, yet," she said in her soft Texan voice. "He always comes back to Jack-knife like a good penny—and this time you're returning with him."

"Me?" Cam blinked, and the light of the fire was suddenly dazzling. "I—I—"

"You're coming back," the girl said deliberately. "Don't forget that for one minute—"

And Cam mounted the Red Rogue's black with a singing in his heart that was just like the racing music a good fiddler could play.

Hank Parsons came from the cavvy aboard a rangy gray, and he handed over a double gunbelt with a pair of black Colts riding its holsters. "Try this on for size, amigo," he drawled. "One of the nighthawks figgered as how he wouldn't be needin' his hardware for awhile."

Cam hefted the Colts, and they felt good on his hands. He buckled the belt about his waist, and swung the black toward the Crossing. "Mr. Parsons," he said with something almost like awe in his voice, "I ain't never been treated so danged swell by anybody!"

"Yuh won't git no more of it," the Jack-knife trail boss said gruffly, "iffen you don't start callin' me Hank!"

His gnarled hand reached out to grip Cam's fingers. "You're doin' a fine thing, boy. Yuh could as easily have let the Rogue play out his hand, or leastways hit for the Canadian to save your own neck. This way—" he let his words drift.

"This way," Cam said, "it's fight. But I'll be doin' it on the right side of my conscience!"

THE LIGHTS OF Jones Station loomed on the yonder bank just ahead of them now, and Cam looked at his Texan partner and said: "Hank, I figger we got two strings to our bow. Never come to me until now that some of the settlers swillin' rotgut in Jones place ought to recognize this bronc I'm ridin'. Mebbe we'll hear what we want to know."

"We might at that," Parsons agreed as they gentled their mounts at the hitch-rail in front of Jones Station. "And if we don't—"

"We'll keep lookin' for a big red-head —" Cam said, and the sod felt good and springy beneath his boots as he tethered the black. He noticed that the animal kept tossing his head, and pricking his ears at a corral out near the small log school-house that had been erected a little back and to one side of the Station. Then his attention was drawn to a hulking figure that had come to the open doorway of the Station. It was Hoby Jones himself.

"Come in, boys," he called, "and make yourselves at home. Fust drink is always on the house."

"Why that's right nice of you," Hank Parsons said amiably, and Cam was glad the old Texan had come along with him. The Jack-knife man knew a heap sight more than any twenty-year-old kid, and Cam was willing to admit it.

Tension that he couldn't control built up in him as he followed Hank Parsons into the big lamp-lit room where Jones took care of the liquid wants of this neighborhood. Four settlers were seated about one table with a community bottle in the center. Three more men were at a neighboring table, and there were a half dozen drifters lined up at the pine-board bar.

Jones was his own bartender and from

the looks of things one of his own best customers, for when he poured them a drink he poured himself two. Downing one, he raised the other in salute and his watery eyes were big as an owls.

"Here's to ye, gents," he said huskily. "From Texas, ain't ye?"

CHAPTER V

The Red Rogue

CAM deliberately delayed his answer and he let his hooded dark eyes sweep the room for a second time. There were thirteen men in the Station, and not one of them was red-headed.

"Hank, here," he said quietly, "is *segundo* of that outfit across the river. Me, I'm just a lucky drifter. My hoss stepped in a prairie dog hole up the trail a piece, and I had to shoot him. Figgered on walkin' in to here, but a big black bronc come rarin' up out of the dark, and I forked the saddle he was carryin'. Thought mebbe he mighta got away from one of Hank's nighthawks so I rode him over there."

Parsons carried on as smoothly as though he'd been coached in the part, and he made no effort to keep his voice low. Cam could see that every man in the room was listening to their talk, and he was satisfied.

"Warn't one of our broncs," the Jackknife foreman said, "so we un's decided to ride back here and see if he belonged around your station."

"W'al now—" Jones began, and then his eyes shifted to the doorway, and Cam turned to see who had come through the opening, and he felt his stomach muscles knot.

Long-neck Jim Brannigan lounged against the door-frame, stroking his white-stubbled face. No recognition showed in his eyes as he slouched to the bar.

"Whisky," he said, "and I don't want any of your common stuff, Jones."

Another newcomer came drifting in through a dark hall that evidently stretched to a rear exit. A big man, his brown hair was close-cropped. A pair of steel-rimmed spectacles sat high on the bridge of his long, beaked nose.

"Howdy, perfessor." One of the men at the table where the foursome were seated tried to rise then slipped back into his chair. "Come on over hyar and have a drink. I wanta ask yuh why them brats of mine can't learn to cipher—"

"It's cause they ain't got no more sense than you, Tom," another man at the table chuckled.

The big man adjusted his glasses, and smiled. He did not look very old for a schoolmaster, Cam thought as he watched the man move toward the table.

"My friends," his voice was rich, with a timber that was almost melodious enough to set the hanging lamps to swinging, "a man can only do his best. Your children will learn. Give them a little time."

Cam listened to that voice, and he felt a tingle run the length of his spine. He had heard those tones before, *filling a room as large as this*. A house in the wilderness. A house in the Nations. And yet he could not believe the evidence of his own ears. This man had brown hair. He wore glasses on the bridge of his beaked nose. He was the schoolmaster for the children of all these settlers, seated here enjoying their convivial drink at the end of a long day's work.

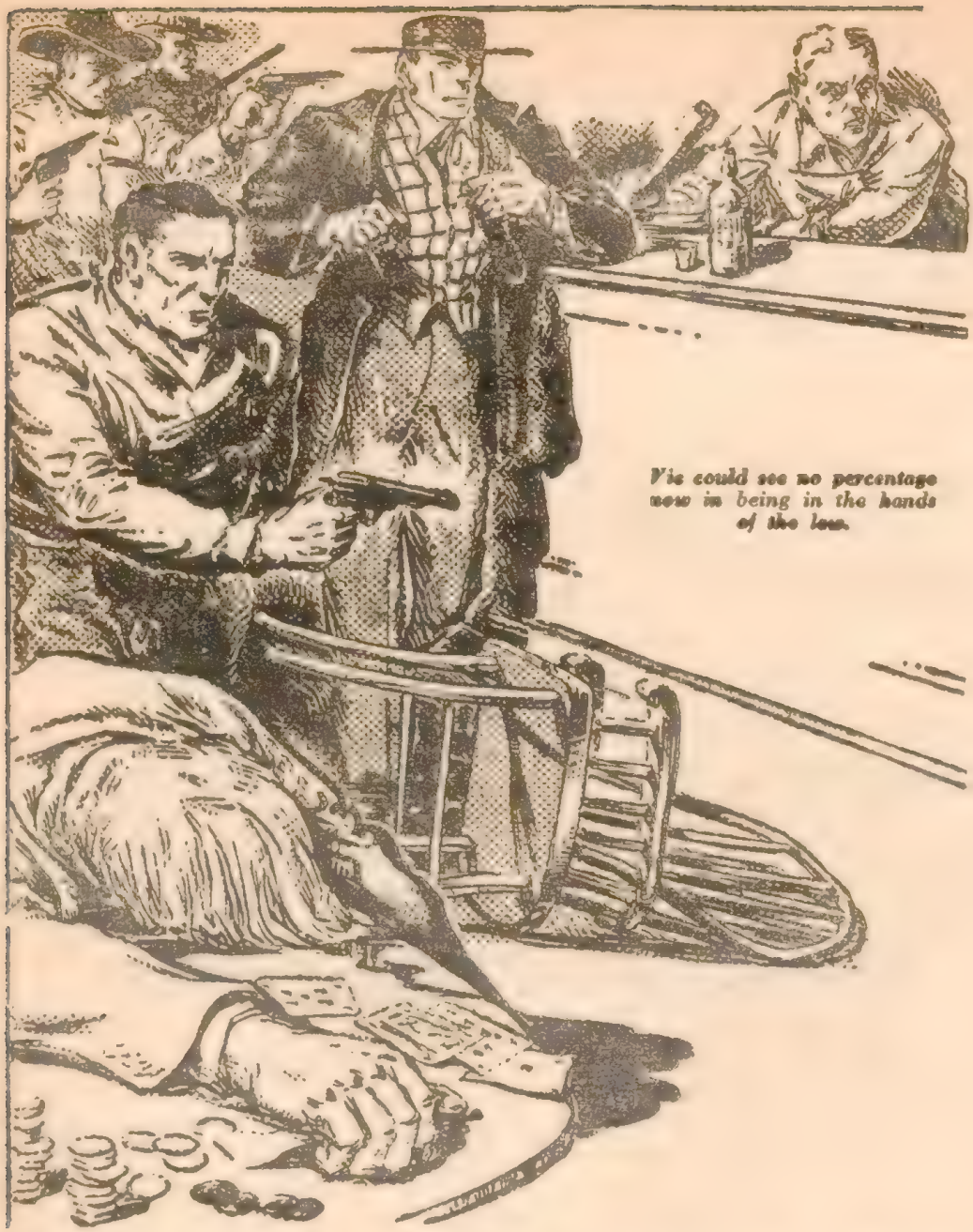
This man could not be the Red Rogue.

Cam let his eyes coast to Long-neck Jim Brannigan, and he wondered if the old owlhooter had been sent here to kill him. If he had it would pit the skill of instructor against pupil, and Cam knew with gray certainty who would win. Then he forced that thought from his mind. He wasn't going to die yet. "Not until I find a red-head, and have a talk with him—!" Cam thought.

Then through his thoughts, he heard the settler called Tom joking with the schoolmaster. "Perfesser, what in tarnation did you poke your nose inter? Looks like a cat's been scratching it—"

Cam swiveled around, his drink forgotten, and the light from the lamp

(Continued on page 90)



Vic could see no percentage now in being in the hands of the law.

GUN TALK IS LIFE

THREE persons had taken young Vic Barr's life in their hands. Two wanted to shape his future in a different pattern. One schemed for his sudden death or the life of a law dodger on the owlhoot trail.

Lola Martin, as self-willed as she was beautiful, sought to inspire Vic Barr to become a rich man and a powerful one. She was sparked by an ambition as great as Vic Barr's love for her.

King Randall, already rich in goods

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

and land, and ruthlessly powerful, had but the thought to remove Vic Barr from his way by any means at hand. Lola Martin's ambition unwittingly proved the circumstance that suited King Randall. King wanted Lola Martin.

Becky Landon, the too quiet, widowed dressmaker who only a few years before had been widely known as *Flame,* that name and no more, had the strange and grim purpose to restore Vic Barr to the

Because of a girl's over-weening ambition, Vic Barr was gambling his herd, his spread, everything he owned, even though he suspected the other players!

clean and humble life he had known before Lola Martin's vivid and blazing beauty had aroused all the wild strain in his blood.

All of which proved how destiny and a past that is not a man's own can ride upon the range of his days and herd him aside from all of the things he had meant to be. Vic Barr was being prodded along to his own death or ruin on account of something that had happened a good twenty years before when he had been a prattling kid of five.

Of the three who were thinking for him, King Randall was winning. Big and smiling King Randall was watching the culmination of his plan in the smoke-filled, jangling saloon and dance hall, with its gambling layout. This night there would be quick and deadly gunsmoke in the *Gold Strike* honky-tonk, the hottest spot in *Shoshone*.

Of the three, Lola Martin knew she was losing or had lost. She knew it with a desperation that had become greater than her ambitious demand upon Vic Barr, which had put him where he was.

And of the three, quiet Becky Landon who had been the *Flame* of King Randall's honky-tonk for a dozen years, bided her time and held a hope born of a strange vigil that had lasted twenty years. Becky Landon waited and watched with quiet patience, but she never walked in the town without the loaded derringer hidden upon her.

VIC BARR was flushed with drinking, but his dark eyes stayed keenly upon the long-fingered, white hands of the card dealer. His lean body appeared relaxed in his chair, but his right hand was on the table's edge and within four inches of his hitched-up gun.

All of Vic Barr's chips were down. The small stacks of red and blue he had shoved to the middle of the table were his last. And in them were his small herd of Herefords, his Leaning H spread, and all that went with the land his father had left to him on Nugget Creek.

Galon, the dealer, had glanced over at King Randall with but a flick of his colorless eyes. Yet Vic Barr had noted this though he didn't take his gaze off the dealer's hands long enough to see King Randall nod slightly and turn with apparent carelessness back to his drink on the bar.

Two other players were out of it. Vic Barr had called for one card. It came to the table with magical quickness. Vic Barr made no move to pick it up. His leather-brown face was drawn and tight, and seemed pale against his shock of black hair.

"I'll take another card, Galon," said Vic Barr without opening his teeth. "Make this'n off the top of the deck."

The two extra players used their boot toes to slide their chairs back. At the bar King Randall turned only his head, his clean-shaven face showing a little smile.

"I'm giving you five seconds, Barr, to take that back," said Galon, and the dealer's forefinger tapped the first two seconds as he stopped speaking.

"The time's up now!" Vic Barr's voice cracked out this time.

Galon's darting hand had his derringer out when Vic Barr's gun thundered. It was the dealer's mistake that he had counted upon his almost legendary speed. He had not believed the slightly drunk rancher could possibly outdraw him.

Galon's derringer fell from his hand as he flopped forward. A red stain was spreading on his white shirt front.

Vic Barr kicked his chair away, standing up. His gun weaved as the dance piano plunked ahead into a quiet of halted feet and hushed voices. Vic Barr made an error then. He stepped back several paces and turned to look at King Randall.

"Yuh all saw it!" rapped out Vic Barr. "Galon's trick deal may have been too fast for any other eyes, but I give 'im his draw an' he had his derringer out."

King Randall nodded as if in agreement, but there was something too pleasant about King, seeing that he had just lost the best card dealer north of Sante Fe. King's voice held a friendliness still, such as he had always displayed openly toward Vic Barr.

"Sure, Vic, if you say it's that way,

"Slap out that fire, Stub," Jones ordered. "Maybe Barr's telling the truth."

even if I didn't have my eyes upon you and couldn't say. "Come on an' have a drink 'fore the law gets here."

Vic Barr was sheathing his guns, taking a step toward the bar, when Patch Getty, one of the two players who had been at the table, spoke up raspingly.

" 'Tain't so, King! Galon didn't draw!

I don't think he was totin' his derringer tonight!"

Vic Barr scarcely believed his ears. He pivoted and his .45 jumped out again.

"You're a lyin' sidewinder, Getty! Galon's derringer's on the floor, under the table! You an' Langer saw it fall!"

Vic Barr's words were addressed to the other player at the table. Langer rubbed his chin and grinned crookedly, looking at King Randall.

"Can't say as I seen Galon go for a gun," said Langer. "An' there ain't any sign of his derringer on the floor."

Vic Barr didn't quite savvy the play until King Randall spoke again.

"So? That puts a different face on it, Barr. Stay where you are. I'll have a look."

Vic Barr had been a little drunk. He'd tossed away all of his savings in a short week. He'd have lost the Leaning H and the herd if he hadn't spotted Galon's crooked deal.

But Vic Barr wasn't dumb enough to wait this out. Like Galon, Patch Getty and Langer were King Randall's men. Vic Barr's gun came around, centering upon King. His forefinger tightened.

"Stay put, King!" commanded Vic Barr coldly. "What your pair o' paid slicks has lied about wouldn't be changed. Easy on your irons, all o' yuh, or King won't live to pay yuh off."

KING RANDALL'S low-held right hand flicked downward. The smart boss who could buy any gun-slinger's skill for a few gold coins had neither desire nor reason to put his own life in jeopardy. Only his icy, black smile didn't leave his lips.

"As you want it, Barr," replied King. "Good witnesses hold you drilled Galon without a chance."

Only the scanty lack of the slightest more pressure upon Vic Barr's trigger finger was between King Randall and a speedy ticket to boot hill. There was no fear apparent in the boss of Shoshone and Vic Barr hadn't the killer urge.

Vic Barr backed through the swinging doors. The tragedy had already sobered him. The fresh, cold air of the outside should have cleared his mind. He hadn't been given the time to think out what his next move would be.

"Hold it, Vic! An' I'll take the gun!"

Vic Barr knew Sheriff Bradford's clipped, brusque voice. He had known the lawman since he was a small button on his father's spread. And every son of the cattle range in the sharp ridges of the *Diablo Oro* mountains, the *Devil Gold* hills that formed a prong to protect the valley, knew that Sheriff Bradford was fair and square to the letter of the law.

The hard hand falling upon Vic Barr's shoulder was that of a rawboned oldster, a lawman who had ridden such close herd upon all crookedness as to compel even King Randall to use all of his cleverness to build his kingdom of power. But Vic Barr could find no percentage now in being in the hands of the law, knowing that all evidence of a murder had been prepared as a trap for him.

Vic Barr's response to Sheriff Bradford's hard command was what he felt it must be. His gun hand dropped, as if he meant to surrender. Then he pivoted with what had seemed to be a movement to give his gun to the lawman.

Sheriff Bradford was tough and seasoned, but his long, angular jaw caught the full, unexpected impact of Vic's blurring left fist. Vic's lean weight was so projected that the blow lifted the lawman's boots from the plank walk.

The hush that had held the Gold Strike saloon broke into a bedlam of yells, topped by the cutting voice of King Randall.

"Get 'im now! That does it!"

Vic thought and acted upon the instinct to survive and escape. As Sheriff Bradford swore, struggled to rise and drag out his single old Peacemaker at the same time, Vic jerked the gun from the lawman's holster.

Shooting from inside the Gold Strike hadn't yet begun, owing to the sheriff being in line. Vic Barr back-heeled toward the palomino gelding at the hitch-rack barely fifty yards away, where riders tied up to keep their horses safe from any random shooting from the saloon.

As he moved, Vic triggered both guns,

sieving the batwing doors with lead enough to hold back a stampede of pursuit. Vic was spending a last bullet in one gun as he freed the tie rein of the palomino and went into the saddle.

The gelding reared and swerved, but Vic's coming meant the home ranch and a feed in the house corral of the Leaning H. The gelding would have turned his nose homeward, but Vic headed away up the dusty street.

Shooting came then from the outpouring of King Randall's gun throwers from the Gold Strike doors. Vic Barr was already riding safely out of gun range.

Although his mind seethed with the injustice of all this, and he knew he was innocent of murder, he had to get into the hills to think over his next move.

That meant the making of the *Slash*, the only pass through the *Diablo Oro* to the westward. A posse would undoubtedly head for this same *Slash*, but Vic was convinced the palomino couldn't be overtaken, or headed off.

In his confidence Vic Barr was reckoning without thought for the smart mind of King Randall, and with no reason to know that much more than the mere details of the card dealer shooting had been cleverly prepared in advance.

As the lights of Shoshone faded behind him on the welt of the hills where the town had been built before gold had petered out and a cattle empire had been created in the great valley, Vic Barr had every justification for the blind rage that started him uttering the kind of hard oaths that could somehow relieve a man's mind.

"If Lola hadn't been so downright hard worked by her folks, she'd have been different," said Vic Barr bitterly when he was finished damning himself for having been a locoed fool. "The Martins ain't never had nothin' but hard luck on their stony ranch, and yuh can't be blamin' any gal for wantin' more than what she thinks would be slavin' the rest of her days."

The loyalty of Vic Barr wouldn't let him put upon the girl the responsibility for his own sudden wild streak, or what

From outside Lola could identify the men's voices.

it had brought to him. He damned again the thing that he could see no way to change.

"I'm a killer in the eyes o' the law, an' there ain't no turnin' back," said Vic Barr grimly as he sighted the sky line in the *Slash*, beyond which lay the stage road from Pueblo and Taos to Sante Fe, over which he might have some hope of escape.

CHAPTER II

The Owlhoot Calls

VIC BARR'S reasoning had been sound. His fresh and seemingly tireless palomino was in the *Slash* where the slanted face of the shining rocks on each thousand-foot wall looked as if the devil's own knife had cut deep through volcanic limestone and quartz, overturning the high hills as it had been withdrawn.

Moonlight had come, full and almost as luminous as the day. The narrow, winding grade of the Sante Fe to Pueblo stage road was in sight, appearing as a light ribbon in places.

"Bradford would be thinkin' I'd head south for the border," said Vic, holding up to breathe the horse. "It'll be a better

ruse to hit north on the stage road, then cut trail in the back hills up Denver way."

Vic watered the palomino where water seeped down and pooled beside the trail through the *Slash*. Not until then did it come to him that he was hungry, and he was cleaned right down to the duds in which he stood.

"Ain't no way I can cash in a dollar on the Leaning H," said Vic Barr thoughtfully. "An' there's no chance to make out saddle-bumming on any o' the few mountain spreads. King Randall cleaned me slick, an'—"

Vic's dubious view of the tight he was in was interrupted by the palomino suddenly lifting his head and nickering. There was immediate reply from another horse not far away where there was a break in the wall of the *Slash*.

Vic underwent his first real chill as a fugitive. He thought he might have been too sure of reaching the *Slash* ahead of pursuit from Shoshone. His hand dropped instinctively to his own gun.

He dropped his hand with a rueful oath. He wasn't a gun slick and he carried no extra shells in his belt, having never had use for them. His gun was empty as was the old Peacemaker taken from Sheriff Bradford and now reposing in his saddle pocket.

A following half minute of silence brought back clearer thinking. Sheriff Bradford and the Shoshónites couldn't possibly have formed a posse or have found a single horse in the town that could have distanced the palomino. Moreover, for the last steep miles to the *Slash* there was but one horse trail.

While there was no good reason for a rider to be here at the side of the *Slash*, Vic judged quickly the horse he had heard might belong to some lone hunter or a prospector who still sought for a creek washing in the *Diablo Oro* hills.

"Have to be like that," muttered Vic. "An' if so, I'll have time to borrow a bait o' grub that I'll need. Best I can figure, any posse will still be more'n half an hour back."

Again his reasoning was sound. In fact, a hurriedly organized posse was more than an hour away. Assembling a pursuit had been much slower than it should have been. In that, too, big King Randall had a hand.

Sheriff Bradford had done a heap of cussing over the delay and the apparent lack of enthusiasm among the gents who had been in the *Gold Strike* saloon to set out in the night after what it was represented to the sheriff as the cold-blooded murderer of Galon, the card dealer.

There was another rider though. A rider mounted on a tough mountain pony. A rider whose pretty face seemed to be haloed by bright hair in the flooding white moonlight.

THE RIDER was Lola Martin. The slim blade of a girl had seen and heard enough of what had happened at the doors of the *Gold Strike* saloon to understand the quick flight of Vic Barr. Hidden in the shadows formed by the porch of the general store, Lola Martin had come out there on the spur of a decision that could possibly have prevented the killing in the saloon.

But she had been compelled to wait, breathlessly hoping for the moment when Vic Barr would appear. In the first minutes of her waiting, Lola Martin had been warmed by her own purpose.

Knowing what had come to Vic Barr had given the girl a new idea. She had no doubt of her love for Vic, and she had never really meant to let him go. Not that her ambition had changed. It was only that, with all of the guile that is born in a woman, Lola had determined it would be much simpler to have her selfish way with a man to whom she was married than to change his manner of life before she had such irrevocable influence.

How Vic Barr might have considered this apparent change in the girl was not to be known. For within minutes the girl's fast pounding heart could not keep the chill from her body as Vic Barr fled before a wild hail of lead.

Lola Martin stood still, transfixed by the suddenness with which gunsmoke disaster had come upon her. Within sec-

onds she heard enough to know that Vic Barr had killed a man and that he would be hunted down.

Lola ran for her saddled pony without being clear in mind what she intended to do. She was near enough to Vic Barr to know when he took the trail leading to the *Slash*, and she followed. The dying out of the hoofbeats ahead found her still riding upward, still not knowing what she meant to do.

VIC BARR moved cautiously toward the break in the wall of the *Slash*, leading his horse. He recalled now there was a small pocked canyon with a spring pool at this end of the pass, not far from the stage road. He expected to come upon the camping prospector when he saw the faint flicker of a fire ahead.

Two shadows detached themselves from either side of the narrow trail. Vic had only time to see the dull gleam of metal when the rocks of the passage seemed to fall upon his head. He went to his knees, not quite out, and he had the strength to twist about and lock his arms around a man's booted legs.

The man fell, cursing, and crying out.

"Belt 'im, Stub! Look out for his gun!"

The one called Stub belted Vic, but it was a kick with his heavy boot that caught Vic's ear and caused his arms to drop helplessly. After that Vic felt himself being dragged by the arms toward the small campfire he had seen.

"Snag the string onto 'im, Stub, till we see what brung 'im in here!" ordered the same voice Vic had heard before.

A loop settled over Vic's shoulders and the rope was wound swiftly around his arms and legs. By this time Vic's dizziness had passed and he could see through slitted eyes.

He made out his captors. The pair had been known around Shoshone as Stub Carson and Burt Jones. Vic recalled they had been employed by the Sante Fe to Pueblo stage line at one time, but were reported to have been discharged following several holdups, in two of which it had been suspected that Carson and Jones had tipped off the robbers to the trips on which money boxes were being carried.

Both men were bearded and appeared to have been toughing it out in the hills for some time. They looked down at Vic Barr and Stub Carson recognized the rancher.

Stub made known his identification with a kick in Vic's ribs.

"It's Barr, owner of the Leanin' H," stated Stub. "Wake up an' start explainin'. Maybe yuh come onto the hide o' the beef an' come trailin' us on your high lonesome?"

Burt Jones had bulging eyes and part of one ear was missing.

"Ain't thinkin' so, Stub," said Jones, scratching his tangled beard. "That there palomino's been rid too damn' hard. What's your big hurry, feller, an' what make yuh come skulkin' onto our camp?"

Vic Barr had been too busy trying to beat King Randall's games in Shoshone to know that one of his cows might have been slow elked. He figured he hadn't much time to explain. Bradford's posse would head this way and it wasn't likely this *Slash* pocket would be overlooked.

Vic had to make up his mind fast. He knew that Carson and Jones were hard cases and he would stand a better chance probably if he handed them the truth.

"Don't know nothin' about a beef missin'," said Vic truthfully. "But if you fellows have any reason to steer clear o' the law, you'll be high tailin' out've here. I killed Galon, Randall's card dealer, in a shoot-out at the *Gold Strike* saloon tonight and Bradford will have a posse hootin' up thisaway is a hurry."

Stub Carson laughed jeeringly and slapped Vic's face until his ears rang.

"Likely yarn that!" he said harshly. "But wait. Burt, sashay up the *Slash* apiece an' listen if there's sign o' riders comin'."

"There won't be time—" Vic started to say.

Stub's ready foot kicked out his breath. Jones swung onto Vic's palomino and went out into the main trail of the *Slash*.

It came to Vic that the white-stockinged, silver-maned horse could be spotted in the bright moonlight. This would make Burt Jones a good target for the Bradford posse if it came upon him suddenly.

Vic didn't want that to happen, although he owed Carson and Jones a whole lot less than nothing.

"Dammit, Carson!" warned Vic. "Stop your pardner. I had to knock out Sheriff Bradford an' take his gun. They'll start shootin' the instant their eyes light onto that hoss o' mine."

Stub Carson yelled after Jones and promised Vic they would roast him alive if he was lying.

"I ain't lyin' an' I'm on the dodge," stated Vic. "King Randall framed that dealer killin' to look like murder. King cleaned me out in his saloon, an' I guess I know why he wants me out've the way. I'm wantin' to live an' get away so's I can even up the score."

Burt Jones came riding back, fast. He hit the ground in a hurry. Apparently he hadn't heard Burt Carson's yell, but he had heard horsemen pounding into the other end of the *Slash* a mile away.

"Slap out that fire, Stub!" ordered Jones. "Reckon Barr's maybe tellin' the truth! If he ain't, it makes no difference. Git all the hosses back into the cave, an' I'll bring Barr."

"Quiet," said Becky. "The other shot in the little gun will probably lodge in your heart."

VIC could hear the echoes along the hollow walls that told of an oncoming posse. It was well for his own peace of mind that he didn't know of a slim, light rider who had slipped from a pony, got into the shadows and remained hidden while Burt Jones was making his

ride up the *Slash* and back.

Lola Martin had arrived just in time to see Jones make the dash on the unmistakable palomino. The horse's white feet and mane were marks in the moonlight. The rider was too indistinct for Lola to see if he were Vic Barr or another man.

Lola had heard the voices back in the small pocket and she was smart enough to remain quiet and hidden. When Jones returned on the palomino and rode back into the pocket, Lola could hear the increasing sound of the approaching posse. She had been holding her pony's muzzle to keep it quiet.

Lola swung lithely back into the saddle. If ever a girl acted on impulse, she was doing it now. She was convinced that Vic Barr must have found refuge with others in the *Slash* pocket.

Lola turned the pony and rode directly toward the oncoming posse. Gaunt, angular Sheriff Bradford headed a dozen men who pulled up.

"Lola Martin?" exclaimed the lawman. "An' what in tunket you doin' way up here, traipsin' about in the night? Say! Did you see—?"

Lola was quick thinking. The sheriff had always been a friend. Some of the posse she knew as hangers-on of the *Gold Strike* saloon. Lola interrupted.

"Yeah," she said miserably. "I saw Vic Barr get away from town an' I tried to catch up with him. I almost made it, but my pony tired out on the grade an' Vic went through the *Slash* into the stage road. I had to give up—I'd have gone with him—"

Sheriff Bradford was gruff but kindly.

"Ain't holdin' that against you, Lola," he said quickly. "I ain't even askin' which way Barr took on the stage road, for when you love a man you wouldn't be worth two hoots in hell if you wouldn't lie for him. C'mon, boys, we'll split up on the stage road."

Sheriff Bradford gave Lola a kindly pat on the shoulder and the posse left her there in the *Slash*.

VIC BARR found himself in a deep, wet-walled cave. The space was big enough for the three horses and the men. Stub Carson pulled the lass rope from around Vic.

Nothing was said for several minutes, until after the posse was heard racing on through the *Slash* toward the stage road. Then Stub Carson pulled Burt Jones to one side and they talked in low tones.

Vic Barr was still dizzy and his head ached. When the pair of hard cases came back to him, Burt Jones produced a full bottle.

"Have a snort, Barr," he offered. "Maybe we was a bit too quick, but we thought yuh was lookin' after the beef we took. Stub tells me yuh was framed by King Randall into a murder, an' yuh got it in your craw to git even."

Vic welcomed the fiery stimulant. He had two long pulls before he replied. Stub Carson spoke up.

"Seein' that posse makes it look like what yuh said is square, Barr," said Stub. "If that's so, yuh ain't got a Chinaman's to git outta *Diablo Oro* country unless yuh throw in with us. An' it so happens that we can use yuh an' give yuh a chance to play even with King Randall at the same time."

Vic Barr was fully aware that Stub Carson was speaking truth. With Bradford's posse through the *Slash* and spread out, he would be rounded up.

"Just what d'you mean about gettin' even with King Randall?" asked Vic. "I'd like to ride back an' burn his *Gold Strike* saloon an' him with it."

Vic's stomach was empty. He tried the fiery whisky again.

Burt Jones nodded to Stub Carson. Stub put it into words.

"King Randall's sending out the biggest cash payment he's ever made on the next Sat'day stage to Sante Fe," said Stub. "An' if it don't git through on time King Randall's losin' damn' nigh all the land an' property he's taken over around Shoshone."

CHAPTER II

Way of a Woman

MOONLIGHT was blurred and dimmed some inside the small spring pocket of the *Slash*. But when this vague luminance struck upon the eyes of Lola Martin it reflected a greenish glow. The living fire in the girl's eyes added greatly to her blazing beauty.

Another characteristic of Lola Martin was her indomnitable persistence and courage. Yet grinding circumstance had made this part of her a harder emotion that took something away from the appeal of her natural feminine loveliness and charm.

Just now it served to send her back into the *Slash* pocket where she had seen the palomino and the rider who might have been Vic Barr disappear. Also it caused her to act with cleverness.

Lola was aware that some of the Bradford posse might come riding back. With full knowledge that she was setting herself afoot for the long miles back to Shoshone, Lola freed her pony and sent it on the trail that would cause it, by instinct, to return to the poor land ranch of the Martins.

This gave Lola a clear way to investigate the *Slash* pocket without the pony being present to betray her. She found the still warm embers of the doused fire. Stony ground toward the back of the pocket prevented her finding sign of the men or horses who had been here, just as it would have befooled Bradford's possemen later if any had entered the place.

The distance around the brushy walls was not great. Lola followed the steep cliffs, convinced there must be some hideaway. Thus she was close to the brushy covering of the cave when she heard the voices of men that echoed hollowly.

The greenish glow was more pronounced in her eyes as she listened. Half an hour had passed since her encounter with the posse. Lola would not have known that Vic's brain had become inflamed by repeated swigs of cheap Shoshone whiskey, if his language hadn't been foully vengeful as he talked thickly.

Having passed her short lifetime near Shoshone, Lola instantly identified the two men Vic was calling "Stub" and "Burt." Vic's own words brought hard resentment to the girl. For she was much too self-centered to accept the notion that her own demands upon Vic Barr had been instrumental in bringing him to this—the outlaw trail that called as a

"To everybody in those days I was known as the Flame."

natural result of reckless gambling and a killing.

Vic was talking loudly, with hard menace in his voice.

"Yuh say the dinero will be fetched to the stage road by two men in a buckboard on Sat'day!" stated Vic with stubbornness in his voice. "Why'n't hold up the fellas in the buckboard an' grab it? That'll give me a split to high tail outta the *Diablo Oro* after I've evened up the raw deal I got in Shoshone."

"Two damn' good reasons why not," spoke the voice that Lola identified as that of Stub Carson. "Old Bradford ain't gonna leave off combin' all the badlands close to the *Slash*, thinkin' yuh might

o' holed up. An' by waitin' an' holdin' up the stage in the gulch a mile or so south, it'll be a wide guess what owlhoots done the job. We're figurin' on still hangin' around Shoshone."

"That's how she lays, Barr." Lola knew the voice of Burt Jones. "We was needin' the third hombre an' it makes yuh fit in. All we're wantin' yuh should do is stay back on a flat ridge jest above the stage road an' cover us if shootin' starts. Then we can take the stage from both sides an' su'prise the shotgun guard."

"Yeah—yeah," agreed Vic drunkenly. "Gimme another swig outta that bottle. Sat'day, huh? This bein' Thursday night gives us two days. But we can't be stickin' here."

"There's a way up back o' this cave, Barr," said Stub Carson. "An 'we've got a hideaway where yuh can hole up safe enough. This'll be the biggest haul o' cash ever made off'n the Sante Fe stage. An' maybe so we can figure somethin' even bigger down close to the border if yuh stick with us, Vic."

"O' course I'm stickin'," stated Vic Barr. "I know now a man's a plumb fool to be nursin' cows an' makin little or nothin' at all. I've learnt a few things of late, an' I'm seein' where yuh have what yuh take any way yuh can take it."

LOLA MARTIN heard the three men moving and the slow tramp of their horses receding into the cave. For several long minutes a battle waged inside the girl.

Vic's final words kept repeating in her mind.

"Yuh have what yuh take any way yuh can take it."

There was then an impulse to rush into the cave, to confront Vic Barr and to try and convince him what a fool he had become. That thought was overcome by a stronger urge that must have been born in the girl.

Her selfish desire for an easier life, a life removed from the hard work and the long hours of a cow ranch, had become a demand that Lola could not overcome. Her nineteen years had been as the daughter of the poor Martins, learning there were endless chores to be done before she was old enough to walk miles to the valley school.

Always up before daylight and always working after supper by lamplight, her days had always been a slow and profitless grind. She had worn made-over clothes. Her only good dress had been made for her last year by the queerly quiet Becky Landon, the dressmaker of Shoshone.

The dressmaker had presented it as a gift. And that had been, as she explained, because it had been made for a girl in town who had moved away. It had fitted Lola perfectly, and she had hoarded that dress, wearing it only to the few dances she had found time to attend in the town.

Good looking, slow speaking Vic Barr had attracted the girl. She had been sure she was in love with him. At first, she had imagined that Vic's Leaning H ranch would be her escape from the drudgery she always had known at home.

Then one night Vic had held her in his arms and spoken the words that had been like touching a spark to a slow fuse.

"We'll have to work hard, honey, to make the Leaning H into a payin' spread?" he had said with his lean cheek crushing her small ear. "But havin' you'll be worth it, an' by the time there's some little tykes, we'll be buildin' up somethin' to leave them."

"Yes, Vic," she had agreed, but the spark of resentment had taken fire inside her.

That was the beginning of it. This tonight was the ending. The spark had reached the powder. For a brief space there was an emotional explosion, then there was cold anger, a determined resolve.

Vic Barr had failed her. He had chosen the owlhoot trail. She was free now, she felt, to gratify her own hard, grasping ambition for an easier life.

Lola Martin laughed and all of the mirth was gone from her.

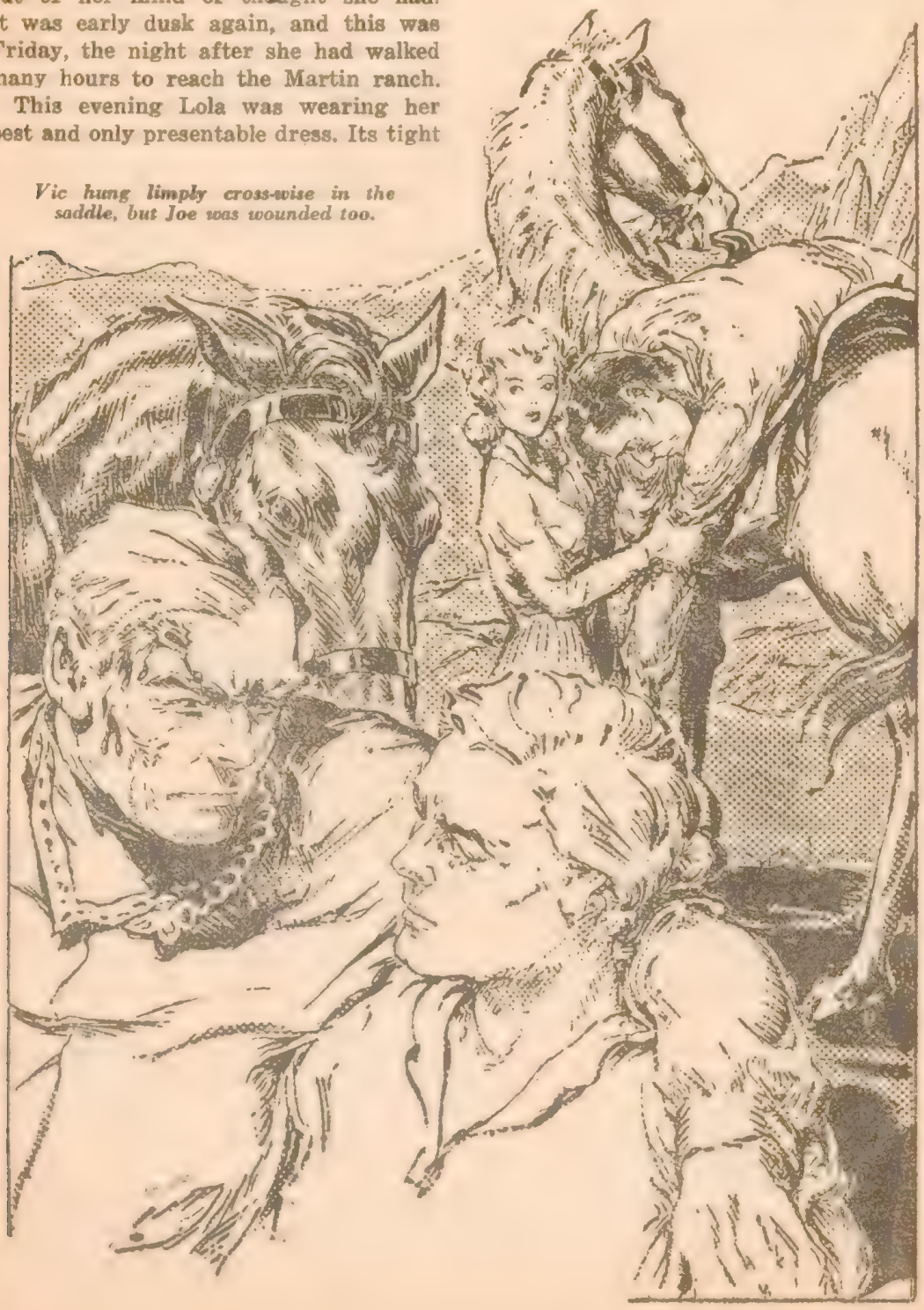
"King Randall wants me," she whispered. "He'll make me the greatest lady of Shoshone, of Sante Fe. He'll buy me

all the things that I want. Why, I'll have Becky Landon working months for me alone."

IT WAS THE NATURE of Lola Martin to act directly. She had put Vic Barr out of her mind or thought she had. It was early dusk again, and this was Friday, the night after she had walked many hours to reach the Martin ranch.

This evening Lola was wearing her best and only presentable dress. Its tight bodice and the flaring skirts made her appear small, a doll-like figure, but with vivid fire in her greenish eyes and a shining of her coppery hair that turned the eyes of every man she passed.

King Randall had his small office for



Vic hung limply cross-wise in the saddle, but Joe was wounded too.

land deals and other business apart from the *Gold Strike* saloon. Lola made sure she was unobserved by townsfolk outside, and that it was the shadow of big King Randall she could see in the lamplight through the window.

Lola felt none of the strange stirring that had come to her when she had first known Vic Barr had been about to take her in his arms. Twice King Randall had asked her to marry him and she had laughed at him.

As she raised her small, clenched hand to rap on King Randall's door, Lola was coldly unemotional. She was reaching out to take all that the richest and most powerful man in Shoshone could offer, and her mind was entirely upon what her life soon would become.

Lola had been sure that no one was watching her. She missed seeing the small, primly skirted and bonneted woman who had paused across the narrow, dusty street.

It wouldn't have mattered to Lola, for the middle-aged woman, with her slightly graying hair drawn into a tight knot, was only Becky Landon, the dressmaker. Lola had come to know Becky Landon only since the quiet woman who never mixed with other women of the town had by a strange chance given her the dress she now was wearing.

Becky Landon's face was grayer than it should have been. Her fingers curled into her palms tightly and her lips moved in a soundless whisper as she watched Lola Martin at King Randall's door. No person in the town would have suspected the truth when quiet, plain Becky Landon put her hand to her waist front, then dropped it.

The little dressmaker's hand had touched the shape of the silver-mounted, two-shot derringer she always carried when she walked the streets of the town.

Before Lola's light rap could have been heard, King Randall's heavy voice was raised, a chair scraped the floor inside.

"So you can use five hundred, Langer?" The voice of King Randall cracked with anger. "You say you've still got the gun, huh? Yeah, Langer. You've got somethin' more comin'—and it's this!"

A chair banged over. Two bulky shadows moved before the window in the lamplight. Lola heard a blow struck, muffled by the wall, and a man's body crashed into the door with such force that the small building shook.

Lola was frightened. She stepped quickly to one side. She was just in time, for the door was jerked open. King Randall's strength was enormous, for with the grip of his two hands he pitched the other big man through the doorway onto his face.

King Randall's rage erupted again.

"You've got to midnight to bring me that gun, Langer! Before twelve o'clock, at the saloon! If you don't, you can't ride enough miles from Shoshone to save your sneakin' hide!"

Lola wisely shrank back along the wall of the building. The bearded Langer got to his feet, muttering oaths and mopping at blood trickling from a smashed nose. He lurched away, stumbling, but staying on his feet.

Lola moved out of the shadows and walked away quickly. She watched the man Langer disappear past the glaring lights from the *Gold Strike* saloon. She was not able to see across the street or she would have seen the small, primly skirted figure of Becky Landon as the quiet dressmaker kept an even pace with the departing Langer.

WHEN Lola returned to King Randall's office a few minutes later, her mind had not been changed. Having made her decision, the brief encounter between Randall and the man Langer served only to confirm the opinion she had formed.

Vic Barr was a weakling, a failure. King Randall was a power because he was a strong man. He had just proved that other men could not oppose him. This Langer had for some reason demanded five hundred dollars.

King Randall had knocked him down and thrown him out.

"I'll always know I'll get what I want," said Lola. "King Randall will always be at the top. He wants me and he'll be

willing and able to make life secure and good."

This second time Lola rapped and went in to find King Randall alone. If there was a thin, understanding smile across Randall's mouth before he kissed her, Lola did not see it.

"You're the kind of a woman I've always wanted," said Randall. "I have had my reasons for believing you would accept me in the end. You know what you want and you shall have it. I'm not fooled either. You are coming to me because you know I can give you many things. We are much alike in the way we think."

It was a strange interlude, with the apparent stirring in both girl and man of only basic selfishness and ambition.

King Randall may have desired Lola Martin, but he wanted her to set off his position and power with her vivid, blazing beauty. Lola accepted King Randall for the material life and influence it would bring her.

This was the way Lola understood it at this moment. But life, desire and ambition, and the mystery of love itself can sometimes play strange tricks.

CHAPTER III

Deadly Dressmaker

THE MAN Langer who had been knocked down and thrown out of the office of King Randall staggered across a small bridge over a sluggish trickle of Nugget Creek at the edge of town. It was black dark here, being an hour too early for the full moon.

Thus Langer, cursing and wiping blood from his smashed nose, failed to see the shadowy, grayish figure that crossed the bridge ahead of him. Langer went to the small shack he called home, pushing open the flimsy door, then kicking it shut.

He crossed to the table and struck a match to the lamp. As the flame brightened Langer was jabbed hard in the back. Crying out, his hand going instinctively toward his .45, Langer was frozen by the calm but deadly voice of a woman.

"Freeze, Langer. This derringer is small, but it'll make a nasty hole right through your flabby body. Lift 'em."

Langer raised his hairy hands quickly, and his larger gun was extracted from its holster.

"What yuh doin' here, Flame?" muttered Langer. "Yuh gone queer in the head as some folks think yuh are?"

"Nobody calls me Flame any more, Langer, I'm Miss Landon to you an' all others in Shoshone. You can give me what you didn't sell to King Randall."

Langer laughed harshly, then swore evilly.

"So nobody calls yuh Flame, huh? An' yuh want I should be callin' yuh Miss Landon an'—"

At that juncture Langer felt the pressure leave his back. He made the mistake of figuring the quiet dressmaker of Shoshone all wrong. He twisted, attempted to turn in the middle of his speech.

Langer failed to make it all the way around. Becky Landon's derringer, small of calibre but deadly at close range, made a spiteful crack that couldn't have been heard far outside the shack.

The derringer lead burned along Langer's lower ribs, deeply enough in his flesh to convince him of the cold intent of the dressmaker. Scouring a bone, the bullet caused Langer to clutch at his side and to utter a gritted oath.

"Quiet," admonished Becky. "The other shot in the little gun will probably stop in your black heart. You'll walk out ahead of me and under the cottonwoods along the creek. One yell or move and you get that other bullet."

The hard pressure was back alongside Langer's spine.

"But yuh can't make me—I'll never tell yuh nothin'—"

"Stop mouthing and walk, Langer," ordered Becky. "And I ain't mindin' if the whole town sees me shoot you down."

Grunting, Langer stepped out. Becky Landon walked lightly behind him. They crossed another bridge farther up the street and Langer found himself being guided behind a dozen small buildings.

"Open that kitchen door," ordered Becky. "It's never locked."

When they were inside, Langer loosened his tongue.

"Yuh think yuh are respected 'cause yuh been dressmakin' for six years or so," taunted Langer. "But to the whole town yuh ain t nothin' but *Flame* of the *Gold Strike* honky tonk."

"Where's the gun King Randall said you was to have at the *Gold Strike* by midnight, Langer?" demanded Becky quietly.

"Look, *Flame*—Miss Landon, yuh can't make me talk, an' if we git together it'd be worth your while maybe," said Langer. "Yuh can't keep me standin' here all night, an' Randall's likely to do what he says if I ain't shown' up by midnight."

"We're not getting together," replied Becky. "Come midnight, you'll be safe enough from King Randall. I've too much to do to keep you standing here."

The dressmaker's tone hadn't changed. Langer was given no more warning. It was the heavy barrel of his own .45 that Becky cracked down on the back of his skull.

IN the darkness Becky found her clothesline. When Langer was securely bound, with his hands behind him, she pulled his inert body to the stairs of her fruit cellar and eased him to the bottom.

The cellar was windowless and Becky closed the door without bothering to block it.

"Langer ain't wantin' to be found here by any of King Randall's boys, so he won't raise his voice," said Becky, smiling with lips that were thinned more by years of dreams than by age.

Then Becky Landon pondered for a few minutes, finally coming to a decision. Her kitchen lamp was lighted and this showed rolled blankets in two packs as if the dressmaker had been planning to go away.

Queerly, the handles of a broom and a mop protruded on one pack. Becky Landon still smiled, but it was such a smile as hints at ineffable sadness.

"When I see King Randall again, all Shoshone will remember that I was known as *Flame*," said Becky enigmatically. "If my lights are burning, Lola Martin will come first to me. It gives me but little time. Tomorrow I must be waiting for Joe."

BECKY LANDON was seated between her two circle-flamed sewing lamps. Her street window shades were raised. She was fine-stitching on a silk waist and her thick-lensed working glasses almost blotted out her eyes.

The glasses and Becky's tightly knotted gray hair appeared to add ten years to her age. But behind those glasses were still the glowing eyes that had caused her to be called *Flame*.

Becky did not look up when Lola Martin quietly opened the door and stood there. The girl looked little more than a child with her tightly laced bodice and her flaring skirts.

Lola's face should have been flushed, seeing the word that Becky knew she must be about to give. But her pretty features were as white as could be seeing that for years she had been burned by the sun.

"Yes, Lola?" said Becky calmly, not seeming to look at the girl.

Perhaps Lola imagined that quick breathlessness would pass for happiness in her voice.

"I've news I couldn't keep when I saw your lights, Miss Landon," said Lola. "You wouldn't believe what's happened to me."

"Yes, I believe," replied Becky, her needle threading in and out of the silken cloth. "You intend to marry King Randall."

"Why—Miss Landon! How could you know that? Were you out, and did you see me?"

"I'd have known, Lola, if I hadn't been out," said Becky. "Even if you can't make the telling of it sound as it should."

"Please, Miss Landon, you're my friend," said the girl quickly. "I wanted to tell you first. You'll be making my wedding dress, seeing Mr.—King thinks we ought to be married right away."

Becky snipped off the thread with her even, white teeth before she spoke again.

"King would want that," she said then. "Yes, he wouldn't be waiting until the law catches up with Vic Barr. I don't believe you'll tell me, Lola, that you have suddenly come to love King Randall or that you've stopped loving Vic Barr—"

Lola broke in, raising her voice angrily.

"You've no right to say such, and it ain't the way you think it is," exclaimed the girl. "I don't love Vic Barr, not any more. He proved he wasn't worth it, and if he'd loved me he wouldn't have done what he did. Gamblin' away all he had, an' killing a man, an' turning outlaw."

BECKY considered this for several seconds until Lola seemed about to leave with anger still upon her.

"I'm an old woman, I guess," sighed Becky Landon. "To be sure, child, it's your right to marry King Randall. He can give you all of the things you wanted from Vic Barr. It might have come out this way, even if Vic Barr hadn't killed a man. But he's only a man hunted by the law, Lola, and that isn't quite like being an outlaw."

"You're talkin' like it was my fault," protested the girl. "I know I wanted Vic to leave his ranch and get into town business. A girl has a right to live where she ain't slavin' day and night. But when Vic knew that it brought out his wild streak, and he'd have been that way anyhow."

Becky pushed her work from her lap.

"There's a wild streak in every man," she said. "You've heard about the killin', and it's been made to look like murder. You're quitting Vic Barr when he needs you, Lola."

"I'm no fool!" declared Lola vehemently. "It's more than the killin', like might have happened to any man. But Vic Barr's turned owlhoot and he was in cahoots with two other outlaws all the time. I won't tell how I know, but Vic Barr an' two others are figuring on holding up the Sante Fe stage tomorrow night below the *Slash*—

Lola stopped speaking abruptly as she saw Becky's eyes were intently upon her. The girl apparently realized that her anger had caused her to say more than she intended. She seemed to expect Becky Landon to defend Vic Barr, to argue her story of the stage holdup couldn't be true. Instead, Becky Landon nodded.

"Yes, Lola, I expect Vic Barr might do that," she said calmly. "Have you told King Randall, or will you wait an' tip off Sheriff Bradford?"

"No—no! Please, Miss Landon! I said too much. I don't want Vic Barr caught. But I don't—I can't love him any more. It's my right to get something out of life. As Mrs. Randall I'll have everything I want."

Becky nodded and surprised the girl with her smile.

"Yes, Lola, it's every woman's right to get all she can out of life. I'll make your wedding dress. You look tuckered out, child. I'm sorry I've said so much. I'll fix you a drink and then do some measurin' for your dress. Did you intend to ride back to the ranch tonight?"

"Yes, I'd thought I would, but I'll be glad to have you get started on the wedding dress," said Lola, a relieved note in her voice.

As Becky went into the kitchen and poured hot water into two glasses, Lola turned to the window, looking out into the street. It was well she could not penetrate Becky's thick glasses and read the intensity of her eyes.

The drink warmed Lola and she laughed lightly for the first time.

"I'd have been a fool to marry Vic Barr," she told Becky. "He couldn't get his eyes off the ground until I told him what he'd have to do if he wanted me. Then he proved what a fool he was."

"Many men turn out to be fools," said Becky. "And many women."

CHAPTER IV

Strange Vigil

LOLA MARTIN awoke half dreamy and a little sick. Mountain sunshine poured through the window of a cabin on a creek flat. It was early morning and clean, crisp white curtains fluttered at the window.

As if she were in a new world, Lola vaguely remembered having a warm drink with Becky Landon, the little dressmaker of Shoshone. Apparently that had been last night. Now she saw Becky Landon again. Becky was using shears to trim two laurel bushes that stood like guards beside a rough wagon trail that led to a brawling creek on the other side of which was the dusty white stage road to Sante Fe.

Lola didn't absorb all of this quickly. Her slim hands touched a newly ironed coverlet on the great double bed on which she was lying. All effort to recall what had happened faded out.

Lola couldn't know that Becky, in her freshly starched gingham dress, had been remarkably active after one warming drink had put the girl to sleep. It had been a midnight activity of strange but definite intent.

First, Becky Landon had written two brief notes. One was addressed to Sheriff Bradford. She had hurried out and left this note at Sheriff Bradford's office. The not to the sheriff was simple and direct.

> "If you'll be at my cabin on Slash Creek at 10 o'clock this Saturday night, the law will be given an amazing break. Come prepared for gun trouble—
>
> "With this is a sealed note I wish delivered to King Randall, at sunset to-day, Saturday—"
>
> Becky Landon

Balked in all his efforts to find the hideaway of Vic Barr, Sheriff Bradford had returned and had been asleep when the notes were left at his office.

Lola Martin had not known that she had been carried gently and placed on straw under a blanket in the spring wagon to which a team of sorrels already was hitched. Lola didn't know either that a muttering prisoner, Langer, had been walked with his arms bound at the point of a gun and compelled to lie down in the back of the same spring wagon.

Lola could see the wagon outside the door but it meant nothing. Her drowsiness prevented her from getting up when she tried. But she could see that the inside of the small two-room cabin was spic and span.

Becky Landon evidently had wasted no time for it was now a little after sunup.

"Good morning, child," greeted Becky Landon, entering the door. "I'm not sorry, and I won't explain. You will be unable to move most of the day. We have a prisoner, a man named Langer, who is sleeping in the other room."

"But why," murmured Lola, trying to arouse a spirit of anger against her sleepiness. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Before you passed out last night you couldn't tell me where Vic Barr might be hiding out. But you did say he was to be the lookout at the top of a flat ridge, a mile below the *Slash*, in the holdup of the Sante Fe stage around sunset to-night. We won't let Vic Barr be in on that stage holdup."

"I don't care!" The girl was sickly angry. "What he does is no concern of mine."

Becky smiled. She said: "It may be all mine, child. This is one time that King Randall ain't getting what he wants."

"I'll be all right. I'll get out of here!" exclaimed Lola, but fell back when she tried to rise.

Becky's sad smile remained unchanged.

"You bring to mind a lot of things that came to me when I wasn't much older than you, Lola," said Becky quietly. "That was twenty years ago I came to live with Joe Landon as a new bride in this cabin. Unlike you, I had everything that a girl could seem to want. Schooling, fine dresses, money to spend, everything wealthy ranch parents could give me.

"I was so much in love with Joe that I defied my parents and gave them up and came to this creek claim cabin as happy as any girl could be."

LOLA stared at her, her tight lips straight with defiance.

"Why tell me these things, Becky?" she asked.

"I thought you might like to know why it hadn't worked out. Joe washed

out only a few dollars a day on this claim. After three months I told Joe I must have the things I had left behind, that we must leave here.

"Joe was quick and impulsive. He swore at me for the first time that day. He packed. He told me he would get me the things I wanted any way he could get them or he would never come back. He never did."

"I had heard—them say—"

"Yes," interrupted Becky quickly. "They say I was known as *Flame*, a girl of the *Gold Strike* honky tonk. That is right, Lola. But I watched Joe go down the trail that is now the stage road. I was sure he would come back the next day. I was sure of it for many days and each evening at sunset I would stand out there between these laurel bushes watching the trail. For six months I watched the trail at evening at sunset. Joe didn't come back. I had no word.

"I had no money to live here any longer. I went away for a while. I came back a year later to Shoshone. I'll be skipping a dozen years. A dozen years I was called only *Flame*. Again I had everything I wanted—except Joe Landon.

"There isn't much more to tell, Lola. Each year on September 15th I come back to the cabin. I keep it in order and repair myself. Once each year I stand at sunset looking down the trail that is now the stage road to Sante Fe."

"I don't care, but why—why did you give up the things you wanted so much?" asked Lola in a low voice."

"Six years ago I became the dressmaker of Shoshone," said Becky. "It was because I had a letter from Joe. I have had other letters since. Joe couldn't come home but I came here each year. Tonight, child, Joe Landon is coming home up that trail. I'll be standing there, waiting. He was released from State Prison three days ago."

"But what has that to do with me?" questioned Lola, an edge still in her voice. "Are you thinking I'll be fool enough to be watching a trail hoping that Vic Barr may come back—from State Prison? I have more sense than that, Becky."

"Perhaps, Lola," said the older woman calmly. "Vic Barr may be going to prison and you will be free to marry King Randall. It will be night before you get back your strength to leave. From then on you can do as your mind and heart bid you."

"Then why did you do this?" cried out the girl. "It's on account o' you hatin' King Randall, ain't it?"

"I haven't any feeling for King Randall, not even hate," said Becky. "It's been twenty years since I let Joe go away, an' before this night is done I might be sendin' him back for the rest of his life."

Lola Martin was too young to know the depths of living from which had come Becky Landon's amazing and puzzling statement. Perhaps Lola could think more clearly because of the lethargy that held her.

The man Langer was soundly asleep on the floor of the inner cabin room. He had sorely needed a drink when the cabin had been reached before sunrise. Becky had mixed that drink, too. There had been years when she was known as *Flame* that such drinks were often given to men who had come with too much money to the *Golden Strike* saloon.

Lola was silent for a few minutes. Becky went to the inner room and returned with a rifle, a Winchester repeater. The rifle, like all other things about the cabin, had been kept polished and in order. Becky filled the Winchester magazine, that little smile playing over her thin lips.

Lola could keep quiet no longer.

"You said I'd be free to marry King Randall, an' you didn't hate him," said the girl. "What're you meanin' to do?"

There were no glasses over Becky's eyes now. They burned with deep and lambent flame as she looked at the girl.

"This is Joe's rifle," stated Becky. "I've waited twenty years for him to come up that trail. He will find his rifle ready."

Lola Martin had a chill sense of fear. She had been too young to know much of Becky Landon's life, but she had heard stories. Now it seemed that the little

dressmaker must really be touched in the head.

Before Lola could find more words, there came the faint clicking of hooves over across the creek. Rifle in hand, Becky stepped to the doorway. Lola heard her speak with one hand touching her throat.

"God's in his heaven—" was all Becky said.

CHAPTER V

Love Needs Few Words

LOLA MARTIN managed to reach a chair where she could see through the cabin doorway. It was now early afternoon, with the sun slanting through the silvery leaves of mountain ash bordering the tumbling creek. The creek form which Joe Landon could not wash enough gold to satisfy the demanding whim of the bride he had brought to this cabin.

Lola watched Becky leave the rifle beside the cabin and walk to the freshly trimmed laurel bushes. A tall, stoop-shouldered man had left a saddle horse grazing by the creek and he was limping up the trail. His hair was thin and gray, and as he came closer his face seemed pinched as if he were ill.

After twenty years neither Becky nor Joe Landon cried out to each other. The man saw Becky there between the laurel bushes and he started running, still limping.

Becky did a strange thing. She pulled pins out of her knotted hair and, although it was almost white, it tumbled over her shoulders in a cascade of brightness.

It seemed to Lola that it was Becky Landon who took Joe into her arms and held him tightly to her flat bosom. Joe's arms went around her slowly, as if he were not sure it should be like this after so long a time—so much that he must know lay between them.

When they spoke, the words came clearly to Lola, and to her vivid youthful spirit they made little sense.

"It's good to have you home, Joe," said Becky simply.

"It's—it's like as when I went away," said Joe and his pallid face was lifted, eyes hungrily taking in the cabin and all about it.

"I've kept our cabin nice, Joe," said Becky. "Since I heard from you, I knew we'd always live here when you came back."

"Yes, honey, we'll always live here if you say so," but Joe's voice was troubled. "But—well, I've paid my debt an' I had enough hid away to make it diff'rent. It can be like you wanted—we can go away—"

"Joe, darling, we'll never keep the money," said Becky. "We have only the creek claim and, Joe, I'm the dressmaker of Shoshone now and I'll do my sewing here."

Lola couldn't understand it. Such few words. Nothing of love that she could comprehend, only that Becky was still holding Joe in her arms and he bent and kissed her shining hair.

Love couldn't be like this. It was plain and drab. Becky Landon and Joe must be acting their parts. Then they walked toward the cabin doorway.

"Joe, this is Lola Martin," said Becky.

That was all. But then Lola could see Becky's eyes and the light there was something such as she never before had seen. Joe's dark eyes looked at Lola briefly and he nodded, but he turned back at once to Becky.

"I've food an' a drink out in the lean-to, Joe," said Becky then. "Lola, please lie down. We won't be long."

Becky reached then and picked up the Winchester. Lola wanted to cry out, to say something to this strange, pale man who had appeared to come back as casually as if he had been away only overnight.

Before Lola could find words, Becky and Joe had gone into the lean-to kitchen at the back of the cabin. Lola was weak, but her strength was returning, and she wondered if she could possibly walk away from all this.

But her first steps were too faltering. Lola dropped to the bed, crying softly as she heard the murmur of voices in the lean-to. The after effects of the

drugged drink overcame her then, and she slept.

THE SHADOWS were long when Lola was awakened by a touch on her arm. Becky was standing there. There was worry and happiness mixed strangely in Becky's eyes.

"I've a drink that'll brace you up, an' you must eat," said Becky. "Langer will be awake before long, but he is safely tied. I will tell you now. Joe has gone to bring back Vic Barr."

"No! No!" Lola's reply was vehement. "I don't want to see him! As soon as I can, you must let me go! I'm going to King Randall!"

Becky said: "It won't be necessary, child. In a little while now, at sunset, King Randall will be starting here. You don't have to see Vic Barr, if Joe can find him and bring him back. The Sante Fe stage ain't due for another hour, an' maybe Joe'll be able to talk Vic Barr away from his craziness—"

As if Becky's words had evoked it, there came the rushing clatter of hooves across the creek on the stage road, nearly two hundred yards away. Becky turned from Lola, running to the doorway.

"In heaven's name, help Joe and Vic Barr!" For the first time Becky Landon raised her voice in almost frantic appeal. "Why did the stage have to be ahead of time? Joe can't make it where he's headed in time!"

Lola looked out and saw the six running ponies of the glistening Concord stage as its driver came at top speed down the winding grade that dipped and crossed the gap of the *Slash*. Another man was riding the stage seat with a gun across his knees.

Lola could just make out small, white blobs that were the faces of passengers peering out of the stage windows.

"Please, Becky, you meanin' you sent Joe to find Vic Barr down where he an' them other outlaws planned to hold up the stage?" asked Lola, gripping the dressmaker's shoulder.

"It was what Joe was meanin' to do, child," said Becky tensely. "He figured he could get Vic Barr away from them others. But he ain't had time to make it, seein' that he went afoot an' planned to creep onto them before time for the stage."

Becky's shoulders were shaking. Lola put her arms around her. As if she were angered by this gesture, Becky moved quickly away from the girl, crying out.

"Don't do that! Don't touch me! You'll be marrying King Randall—you'll—"

The little dressmaker whose cold calmness had been beyond that of any other woman Lola had ever known, burst into sobs, burying her face in her hands. Lola was startled, puzzled.

She thought of things she had heard about Becky Landon. Was Becky crazed with jealousy over King Randall? It couldn't be that. It must be then that Becky was in a panic over having sent Joe into what must be certain gun trouble?

Fresh from prison, it could mean that Joe Landon would have his freedom but a little while.

Then Becky was becoming quiet. Her smile was gone and her face was cold and stony.

"We can only wait," she said evenly. "I'll fix the drink to put you on your feet."

As Becky went out to the lean-to kitchen, Lola happened to glance at the pinon growth on the sloping hill above the cabin. She was startled to see two men with gleaming guns dart across an open space.

Lola was sure that one of the men was Sheriff Bradford.

CHAPTER VI

When a Man's Down

LOLA MARTIN wondered at the apparent presence of Sheriff Bradford and a deputy, or perhaps more than one. It appeared that Joe Landon was legally free.

"It might have something to do with Becky Landon's having the man Langer here as a prisoner," said Lola musingly, as Becky was getting the promised stimulating drink.

Then it came to her that the law was probably more interested in apprehending Vic Barr. Sheriff Bradford might know of her presence here and judge she had accompanied Becky Landon to meet Vic.

Before she could finish her guessing, Becky came with the drink. The glass contained a stiff potion of liquor and took immediate hold. Lola noticed that Becky's hands shook and that she was listening intently.

It was not yet dark, although the sun had slanted behind the rim of the *Slash* and created dusky shadows along the creek and stage road. Shots echoed, like the distant cracking of dried sticks along the creek valley.

"Joe! I shouldn't have sent him!"

Becky's hands were clenched as she exclaimed. She stood by the door looking out. Lola saw Sheriff Bradford plainly then, with three other men who broke from the pine-clad slope on horses and raced down and across the creek toward the stage road.

Lola was much stronger now. More than a dozen shots sounded.

"Hadn't we ought to go—to Joe?" suggested Lola, realizing that she had almost said, "Vic," and that this shooting had somehow broken through the crust of her defense against showing emotion.

Becky's voice was low and strained.

"We must stay here, child," she said. "Stay and wait, like it seems I've been waiting forever."

"But we can go along the stage road, Becky," said Lola. "You saw Sheriff Bradford and his men. They must be looking for Vic and they'll pick up Joe, too."

The echoes of the shooting had faded out. The sheriff's small posse was rapidly disappearing in a dust cloud.

"No, Lola, we wouldn't meet Joe or Vic on the stage road, if Joe got there in time," said Becky miserably. "You see, Joe knows all the trails and he wouldn't follow the road. I wouldn't know which of several trails he might take if he comes back."

Energy had returned to the vivid Lola. She was out, pacing back and forth before the cabin. From the inside room came oaths from the man Langer who evidently had been awakened.

Lola was just in time to see Becky walk to the door of the inner room with a heavy .45 in her hands.

"Keep your mouth shut, Langer!" was Becky's hard command. "I'd just as soon drill you as not. And you can count on it that you're doing exactly what I tell you, or I'll put a bullet in you and take a chance on explaining."

Following an oath, Langer spat out, "An' what're yuh wantin' I should do?"

Becky went on into the inner room. Lola heard her talking, but could not make out her words. This was another queer angle to the girl, in the face of the tragedy that might already have struck for Becky Landon.

The Man Langer was silent when Becky came out of the inner room. Then Lola saw Becky place the six-gun on a shelf and take a small derringer from her bosom. After a glance at the little gun Becky returned it.

It was not full dark when the small stones in brush above the cabin started rolling down. Lola was frightened and would have put out her hand to cling to Becky. For the second time the little dressmaker stepped away from her as if she resented her touch.

Then Becky cried out, "Joe? Joe! I'm coming!"

LOLA'S HEART seemed to shrink to an icy knot and her breath was suddenly constricted. Limping Joe Landon was leading a horse, the silver-maned, white-footed palomino of Vic Barr.

A body hung limply, cross-wise of the saddle. There was no mistaking the tumbled black hair of Vic Barr. Vic's arms swung with flaccid freedom that indicated lack of any life.

Lola scarcely realized she was calling out Vic's name, and that she was adding, "Darling, please—no—not you, Vic! Speak to me, Vic!"

But there was drying blood in Vic's black hair and his head rolled loosely. Lola caught Vic's head to her bosom,

holding him and crying out, "Becky! He can't be dead! Help me!"

Then Lola turned to see Becky with an arm around Joe. One side of Joe's head was reddened from a wound and he was staggering. Joe was talking thickly.

"Vic Barr—shot—in stage holdup—fetched 'im back, honey—said I would—"

The wise palomino followed to the cabin door as Joe stopped talking and fell inside. Lola felt her heart beating faster suddenly as a deep, sighing breath came from Vic's parted lips.

"Becky! Becky! Help me!" pleaded Lola. "Vic's alive. Thank heavens for that."

In the face of emergency Becky again was cool.

"Give me a hand first with Joe," she said "We'll put him on the bed. He's got a bullet scour across his head. Hurry, child."

When Becky helped Lola get Vic Barr from the palomino's saddle, there was a deep cut across Vic's forehead. But it had apparently been made by a rock where he had fallen. Vic's right leg was bleeding and the bone had been fractured below the knee by a bullet.

Becky rolled Langer off a cot in the inner room and helped Lola put Vic there.

"I'll have hot water quickly," said Becky. "Joe's wound must be cleansed. I'm hoping his skull isn't fractured."

Lola scarcely heard this. She was on her knees beside Vic Barr, cradling his head in her arms.

"Vic, oh, Vic," she pleaded softly. "Why was I such a fool as to turn back? Open your eyes, Vic. Say something. If you'll only live, darling, I'll go away with you. Vic, you must live. Becky!"

Becky Landon was back in the doorway.

"Joe's heart's all right," she said. "He's unconscious, but I think it's only from shock. Lola! Do you know what you're saying? Didn't you hear what Joe told us? Vic was shot in the stage holdup. Sheriff Bradford will be trailing back this way soon. Vic won't have a chance—"

"Becky Landon!" interrupted Lola fiercely. "Vic will have a chance. I love him and if you'll hitch the team to the spring wagon I'll get him away. I'll go with him. Or maybe you could help me take him away from the cabin—up in the hills."

"Ain't you forgettin', Lola, that Vic's branded as an outlaw and killer?"

"No, I ain't forgettin' anything," declared Lola. "And all his trouble is my own fault. I made him do it. He threw away everything trying to give me the life I thought I wanted. Becky! I don't want anything but Vic. It's like you told Joe—"

Becky suddenly placed fingers to her lips. A rider had come up fast, sliding his horse to a stop at the cabin door.

BECKY turned and Lola saw grayness spread over her face.

"It's King Randall," said Becky. "He's come like I told you he would. He's come for you and it's your choice now, child. Do you want to be a fool and throw yourself away on Vic Barr, killer and outlaw, or make yourself a rich marriage?"

Lola did not speak. She came to her feet and walked into the other room as the figure of big King Randall showed in the doorway.

"By hell!" boomed King Randall. "It's well for you, Becky Landon, that Lola's all right. I'll be having you put away for this. I'm glad I got here in time, darling. I brought a spare horse and—"

"Hold it, King," cut in Lola, her voice low but firm. "I'm not going back with you. I'm sorry. I was hasty last night. I can't marry you. King, and I shouldn't have said I would."

King strode over, gripping Lola's arm. His wide mouth was hard and mocking.

"That don't go, Lola," he announced. "I know Vic Barr's here. I saw his palomino grazing outside. Last night you showed sense. You can't throw yourself into the arms of a murderer. Killing Galon, the dealer, was bad enough, but now there's another score. The guard and a woman were killed when the stage was held up a little while ago and Vic Barr done some of the shooting."

Lola's heart skipped a beat. She could see there was no mercy to be expected from King Randall now.

"It doesn't make any difference, King," she said. "I'm as much to blame as he is for anything he's done. Last night I thought I wanted the kind of a life you could give me. Now I know only that I'm in love with Vic Barr."

King Randall laughed harshly. Lola noticed then that Becky had slipped to the inner door, her derringer held tightly at her side.

CHAPTER VII

Twenty-Year Showdown

A SMILE of ultimate triumph rode the hard mouth of King Randall. He dropped his hands from Lola's arms. Lola glanced over at the bed. She saw Joe Landon's eyes open and close quickly.

"You'll come with me, Lola," stated King Randall confidently. "Vic Barr will be hung for a murder and the stage holdup. Nothing can stop that. You're only a child to listen to Becky Landon. Why Becky Landon was—"

Becky Landon's voice was like bits of ice rubbing against one another.

"I wouldn't say it, King. Not if you want to leave this cabin alive. You're old enough to be Lola's grandfather and you'd like a marriage to set off your riches."

Lola again saw Joe Landon's eyes glint narrowly and then close again. She noticed that Becky's hand had a derringer hidden in the folds of her skirt but that her arm was held rigid and the little gun was pointed into the inner room.

"You think you don't care," stated King Randall, "but Vic Barr can't escape now. Chances are he'll be hanged by the righteous citizens of Shoshone without bothering with a trial. Shooting down a woman on the stage will bring a lynching."

Suddenly Lola became aware of movement around the cabin. Over King Randall's shoulder she saw the hard, angular face of Sheriff Bradford. The lawman held up his hand in warning for silence.

It was then Joe Landon kept his eyes open and spoke. "Vic Barr was in on the shooting during the stage holdup. I was there. Vic Barr did some shooting. He killed Stub Carson, one of your men, King Randall. Burt Jones, another of your men, was salivated right after the woman in the stage was killed. I think it was Burt Jones who broke Vic Barr's leg as he tried to charge down upon the stage. Burt Jones got me with another slug but I was able to get Vic Barr back onto his hoss and bring him back to Becky."

(Joe Landon didn't tell and perhaps he never would that a bullet from his own rifle had broken Vic Barr's leg and that other bullets from the Winchester had finally accounted for Stub Carson and Burt Jones.)

King Randall whirled, a smile of mockery still upon his broad mouth, and once more his heavy hand fastened upon Lola Martin's soft shoulder.

"Veree fine coming from an outlaw and a convict. But it ain't worth a damn in ary court, for convicts can't testify as citizens. Granting that your damfool yarn might be accepted, there's still the coldblooded murder of Galon, my dealer, in the *Gold Strike* saloon. Poor Galon, he was unarmed and he didn't have a chance."

Lola was looking into the deep eyes in the bony face of Sheriff Bradford who had not moved. She saw a tightening of Becky Landon's slight figure. She was in position to see Becky's small derringer pointing a finger of death into the inner room. King Randall couldn't see that.

"You will come with me, Lola," said King Randall. "You want what you can take out of life and that's not the outlaw trail or the memory of a man who will be hanged in the streets of Shoshone. The murder of Galon is sufficient although Joe Landon has lied about the stage holdup."

THE VOICE that suddenly spoke from the other room was shaky but distinctly clear to all inside and outside the cabin.

"It's too bad, King, you didn't buy the derringer that Galon had pointed at Vic Barr when Barr beat him to it and

gunned him down. You signaled me to get it out of the way. I offered it to you. Now it's been bought at a higher price. Although, King, you haven't told them that you had paid me and Patch Getty to drill Vic Barr after Galon had dealt him a crooked card. Yeah, King, it's too bad you didn't buy the gun I have."

King cursed, his hand whipping into his white shirtfront. Becky Landon's arm moved.

"I'm *Flame*, King Randall," she said calmly, pointing the deadly derringer at his shirtfront. "I'm *Flame* and you promised me all the things you now say you will give to Lola Martin. You don't look it, King, but you're an old man and you're fitten to die."

King Randall halted in his stride, his hand holding uncertainly the hideout gun he carried. A voice like the rubbing of a hasp over hard wood cracked out: "That'll be all, King! I haven't heard a thing on which I could hold you under the law, but I promise you that if you're not out of Shoshone within forty-eight hours I shall for the first time in thirty years close my eyes to the law I'm sworn to uphold. The good folks of Shoshone will do more for a little dressmaker we respect and love as Becky Landon than it will to save your worthless hide. The *Gold Strike* is closing! You're getting out! Now you can ride."

Glass tinkled at two windows of the cabin. Short guns of Sheriff Bradford's deputies emphasized the words he had just spoken. King Randall turned, teeth grating together, and walked from the cabin.

BECKY LANDON walked to the door of the inner room in the morning sunlight. Lola Martin sat crouched on the floor beside a cot, her head pillowed on the shoulder of Vic Barr, who was lying on the cot. Vic spoke in a low tone.

"I'll be thanking you, Becky and Joe Landon, as soon as I'm able. I want you to be proud of Joe. He busted my leg and I fell from my horse but I was conscious enough to know that he was the one who tore the lead into the murderers of a woman and a guard."

Becky Landon laid a finger upon her thin lips and smiled. She walked quietly into the outer room.

Becky looked over at Joe. He was sleeping peacefully. Becky's lips moved: "It's too bad, Joe," she whispered, "that you can't know. She came to me within the year after you went down the trail. I gave her to the Martins and swore them to secrecy. A woman is always a woman, Joe, and whether she is rich or poor, she always has a hankerin' after the things she doesn't have. I have learned that in the past twenty years. Some day, Joe, perhaps I'll tell you, when you can be proud of her, when I know you'll never speak."

Becky Landon was humming a little tune. It was the first time she had been that close to singing during all of the years since she had been the *Flame*.

When Guns Wrote News

ONE OF the roarin'est, richest early cities of the then-untamed West, Denver was born of gold-rush gunsmoke back in 1857. Two years later it was a thriving "metropolis" of four thousand souls, if gun-slinging politicians, real-estate boomers and other such outlaws of their day could be counted as having souls.

Editors wrote their editorials at gunpoint in those wild days of 1859. So it was fitting that Denver took its name from James W. Denver, who had been appointed governor of the Territory of Kansas by President Buchanan in 1857.

James Denver was Ohioan by birth, a California pioneer and once congressman from that Golden State. In 1852 Denver killed Edward Gilbert, editor of the *Alta Californian*. Denver was a firebrand in the Free State uprisings of Kansas, of which the still-unnamed Colorado was a part.

Denver was born of gold and cut its political teeth on pistols about the time that Horace Greeley, noted editor of the New York *Tribune*, uttered his famous, "Go West Young Man."

Horace Greeley was one of the first to attempt to bring some law into the turbulent new country of Pike's Peak. The first gold in the mountains eastward from California was discovered in the Gregory Diggings, 45 miles northwest of Denver, near Saddle Mountain.

The rush was a drama of outlawry and tragedy for those first Easterners to travel from the western end of all railroads, six hundred miles away, in Missouri. The gold diggings became scenes of claim-jumping, killings and *vigilante* hangings.

Mining nomenclature possessed its peculiar meanings. "Tarryall" was the name of one gulch where a first graveyard became known as "Boot Hill". Two rich lodes were "Shirt-Tail" and "Bob-Tail."

Three lead-riddled corpses found among burned pines named that spot "Dead Men's Gulch."

One ravine was prospected by three parties. Each of these pronounced this prospect a humbug. A fourth prospector found one of the diggings' richest gold lodes there, and it was known as Humbug Gulch.

JOURNALISTS of that day found Denver fascinating and dangerous. As one traveling journalist of his day recounted:

"Almost every day saw gross outrages from desperadoes crazed by the poisonous whiskey retailed at every bar. Fully half the citizens wore six-shooters and, suffering indignities, later killed their perpetrators at sight.

"The sword of Damocles hung always over the heads of these first journalists. William Byers, editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, (still a morning newspaper of modern Denver), has his printing shop burned, after which he made his new shop a well-stocked armory.

"The correspondent of the St. Louis *Democrat* aroused the ire of one of President Buchanan's appointees. The appointee was the postmaster of Denver, also a chief justice of the embryo commonwealth. One evening this functionary lured the journalist into the post-office. With a cocked revolver at the head of the luckless scribe the postmaster and the judge compelled the correspondent to write a statement that he knew his published story to be false and slanderous.

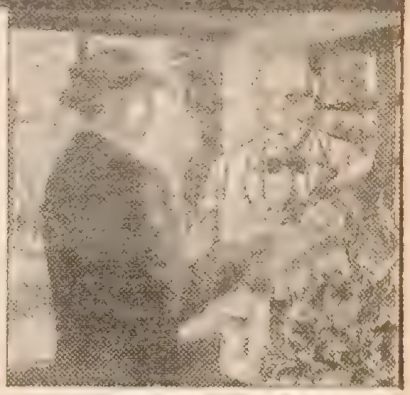
"Under this violent influence a great newspaper of that day made its retraction."

Denver then had become a going city of pioneers who fought for new homes and fortunes on the Platte River. The postmaster, who was a man of wealth, and backed by leading desperadoes, narrowly escaped the gibbet at the hands of vigilantes. He was shrewd, gave bonds to keep the peace. He later turned up as a quartermaster in the Confederate Army in the Civil War.

Denver's first theater, the Apollo,

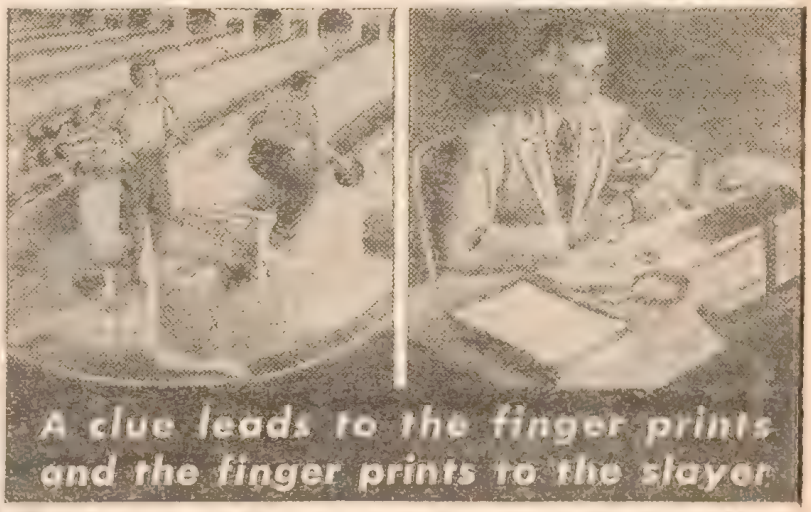
WHO WAS GUILTY?

Can you solve this crime?



Here are the clues

The body of William Manson, a well known and prosperous young man, was found behind a clump of bushes just outside his home in the early morning hours by Patrolman Harris. Near by was the neck of a heavy quart bottle, with other glass fragments scattered about. A blow from this weapon had crushed the victim's skull. Investigation developed that Manson had been in possession of a large roll of bills the afternoon and evening of his murder and that at least six people had seen him handle the money; a lady friend, a waiter, a florist, and three bowling companions. Examination of the broken bottle neck disclosed well defined finger prints. Finger prints obtained from all the probable suspects, when compared with those on the bottle, soon solved the mystery.



...now...here are the FINGER PRINTS

Who was guilty?

1. Lady Friend 2. The Waiter
3. The Florist 4. Bowler #1
5. Bowler #2 6. Bowler #3
7. The Slayer

When the murderer, in his greed, carelessly dropped the bottle he branded himself. The Police Department Finger Print Experts immediately secured prints from the several people who had occasion to know Manson was carrying a large sum of money. Comparison with the freshly made prints found on the smooth glass bottle neck brought the killer to justice in short order. Study the prints and see if you can put your finger on the criminal.

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offered performances with more drama in its audience than upon its stage, which had twelve candles as footlights. The theater was neither ceiled nor plastered and had 350 rough benches.

Actors were a hardy, dauntless lot in those days. They read their lines in competition with clinking glasses, banging billiard balls, uproarious songs and often exploding guns, the theater being over a saloon, gambling joint and all-around honkytonk.

Yet real plays were produced. *La Tour de Nesles* was presented on one occasion almost as well as if staged in an eastern metropolis. The auditors were the real attraction.

A newspaper account of that evening's play recited:

Gaultier agonizingly asked, "Where, O where is my brother?"

A sepulchral voice from the audience replied: "I am thy brother."

Spectators imagined this was part of the play. When it was discovered the heckler was a favorite candidate for congress he was wildly cheered. After tragic finishes in the play for Marigny, Queen Marguerite and Buridan, a burly miner roared:

"Bound to have a ripsnortin' funeral, ain'cha?"

Gold and guns, politics and outlawry, wine, women and singing blood of new pioneers. That was the Denver of 1859.

A former Boston merchant could be found running a quartz mill with two guns strapped to his belt. An ex-banker and a Presbyterian deacon were selling pies and retailing whiskey on Sundays.

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VARIOUS tribal Indians camped about the city. Little Raven, a Cheyenne chief, lost his warrior's lucky piece, a chief medal with the likeness of President Buchanan and his rivals, Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. Little Raven offered ten horses for return of his priceless treasure.

The Arapahoes insisted they were civilized. They demonstrated this by bringing in the scalp of a Pawnee and conducting a war dance over it in a Denver street. The scalp was not worth much, having but little hair. It was held the Pawnees were cowards for shaving their heads and leaving no scalp-lock for an enemy.

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Denver shaped the first civilization of the Rockies, backed by gold and land that produced 13-pound beets, 14-pound turnips and 25-pound cabbages. White men's speculative swindling and Indian barbarism and killing came into the hands of self-appointed vigilante judges who held roadside courts.

Convicted prisoners were often left swinging from the nearest tree, there being no taxpayers to provide expenses for trials and formal executions.

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The firm issued its own gold money, the first ever minted, from "penny pieces" of two-and-a-half dollars to twenty-dollar goldpieces. This business became the United States Branch Mint and still has its stand in G street, although gold is not now minted.

They learned "standing in line" in those days. Long lines waiting for mail at the express office. On a corner a crowd gazes curiously at the Concord coach of

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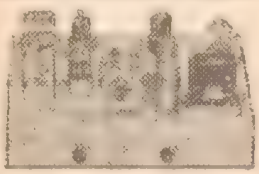

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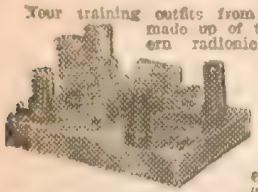

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It will be remembered that the first criminal to hold that title was Al Capone, when Frank J. Loesch, then head of the Chicago Crime Commission, compiled a list of 28 gangsters in 1930, calling them "public enemies." He did far more than coin a phrase which is used universally. Loesch probably did more to rid Chicago of crime than any other citizen. He died at the age of 92 on July 31st, 1944.

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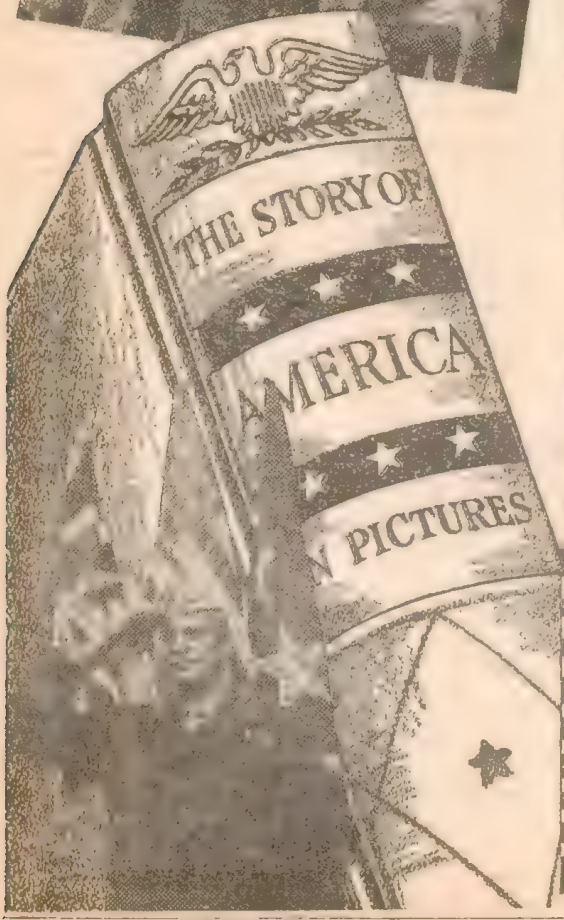

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Black Horse Mesa

(Continued from page 21)

They were able to clean some of the wounds and rebandage them with the fresh water. Each man had a good drink on Second Lieutenant Forbes' orders, and in the darkness he could almost feel them perk up. They were ready for something, but they didn't know what, and they depended upon him again.

Forbes sat on a rock near the wounded men. He could hear them talking, and someone said,

"That was damned clever of the young chap."

They didn't know he was nearby, and he got up and walked away so he wouldn't be eavesdropping. He'd gotten them some water, but they were still going to die. Another man would have concentrated upon methods of getting off the Mesa. They wouldn't have had to worry about water then.

Trooper Bailey was sitting on the ground with a half dozen of his buddies around him. The ordeal had drenched the man with sweat, but he was singing softly, an old cavalry song,

"We're marching off for Sitting Bull,
And this is the way we go;
Forty miles a day on beans and hay
With the regular army—O!"

Dennis Forbes walked to the edge of the Mesa and stared out into the darkness. There were no sounds out there. Apaches didn't sing, nor did wolves when they were stalking their prey. It was a silent business with but one purpose in mind—the complete destruction of the quarry.

GRIMLY, he went over all the information Sergeant Grogan had given him about the Mesa, the canyon on either side of them, the bluff and the ridges surrounding the Mesa. There were probably a hundred Apaches waiting for dawn, and that force had to be broken. It was futile thinking of escaping, or of waiting for reinforcements. Even if they were able to slip through the Apache cordon, they could not go far with the wounded, and the Apaches would trail them and swoop in for the finishing blows.

Again he cursed his inability to think clearly. His mind was muddled with facts, and nothing stood out clearly. He bent down once and picked up a clump of dried brown grass which grew plentifully on top of the Mesa. He had a plan then, but he knew it was a poor one. He thought of discarding it several times and trying something else, but he could think of nothing else.

It was nearly midnight when he went back to the group of men and gave his orders. They listened quietly as he spoke. Sergeant Grogan asked a few questions, and that was all.

"We have to make the attempt tonight," Second Lieutenant Forbes said, almost as if he were apologizing for the weakness of his plan.

Still no one said anything. Sergeant Grogan drifted off toward the north end of the Mesa, taking with him half a dozen men. The others sat down on the ground to wait.

"It might help," Dennis Forbes said, "to rub a little mud on your faces. They won't see you so easily in the night."

Some of the precious water was used to make mud, and faces were smeared with the substance. Second Lieutenant Forbes daubed the mixture on his own face. He reloaded the Army Colt, filling all the cylinders.

Sergeant Grogan came back with four men after a half hour.

"All ready, sir," he said.

"Who did you leave?" Forbes asked him.

"Bromelli and Stevenson," Grogan told him. "They're good boys."

Dennis Forbes listened intently, and then he heard a canteen clank in the distance. The sound came from the north end of the Mesa—the precipitous slope

down which Roger Forbes had escaped.

Sergeant Grogan chuckled softly. "Reckon they could hear that half a mile from here, lieutenant," he said. "Watch the bees gather."

Forbes waited another few minutes, and then he heard a gun barrel strike against a rock, as if a man had been careless with it.

"That Bromelli," Grogan said, "is an actor."

In the still night air the sound carried the entire length of the Mesa.

"All ready," Forbes said grimly. He went over to the five wounded and kneeled down beside Trooper Adams. "You know what we're going to do," he said quietly.

"Good luck," Adams muttered. "I'll be praying for you."

"You have your Colt gun?" the second lieutenant asked.

Trooper Adams hesitated, and then said slowly,

"They won't take us alive sir—any of us."

"We'll hope for the best," Dennis Forbes told him. He went away to where eighteen men were standing at the edge of the cliff down which Trooper Bailey had gone.

Sergeant Grogan had the belt rope around the first man and was preparing to lower him.

"Trooper Bromelli will be comin' back here," Grogan said then, "to let Bailey down, I figured we'd need every gun."

"Very good," Dennis Forbes murmured. It was another thing he hadn't thought about. He wanted the eighteen men down on the canyon floor, but somebody had to lower the last man going down as there was no way in which they could tie the belt rope. "You understand," Forbes said, "that the slightest sound might mean death for all of us."

"The first boy makes any noise goin' down," he said grimly, "is bein' dropped from wherever he is."

Second Lieutenant Forbes stepped forward. He tried not to make it heroic, and he didn't think they thought of it that way. He was in command, and they were to follow him.

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"I'll go down first, sergeant," he said simply.

GROGAN slipped the belt off the trooper next to him and put it around Dennis Forbes' waist. The second lieutenant crawled out to the edge, feeling a sudden sinking sensation in his stomach. It was an eerie business, climbing down into space, not knowing what was down below. He had a new respect for Trooper Bailey as he pushed himself out from the edge.

He let his feet hang and he felt his way with his hands, keeping himself clear of the rock wall. The belt began to hurt around the waist after awhile, and they were letting him down very slowly so that he would not kick any stones loose from the wall.

He felt much better when his feet touched the ground and he was able to unbuckle the belt. When it disappeared above his head, he clutched the Colt gun in his right hand and listened intently, feeling very much alone. This canyon floor might very well be crawling with Apaches now, moving not more than twenty or thirty yards from where he was standing.

He could hear no sounds at first, but a few moments later, from the north end of the Mesa, came the dull clank of a canteen again. He had to smile at Bromelli, and he hoped the Italian trooper did not over do it.

Another man dangled down beside him and the second lieutenant grasped this man's ankles, helping him to find his footing. There had been no sound as the trooper made the descent.

Sergeant Grogan was the fifteenth man down the cliff wall. He said softly,

"I left the lightest men up there, Trooper Bromelli is with 'em, an' he'll be able to handle Bailey alone."

Ten minutes later Bailey came down, and then the belt rope dropped after him. It was broken up, and sagging breeches were hoisted. Dennis Forbes moved carefully down the slope toward the stream running along the canyon floor. Getting across the stream and over against the ridges was the most ticklish phase of the whole business because Apache warriors were all heading toward the north end of the Mesa from which the sounds had come.

"Every damn' one of 'em," Sergeant Grogan whispered, "must o' heard that noise up there. Those red devils kin hear a pin drop at fifty paces. Tana will figure we're tryin' to pull the same one your dad pulled."

Dennis Forbes nodded. "We'll give them plenty of time to lay their ambush," he said. "Some of them will have to come the entire length of the Mesa to reach that slope."

He could hear water sliding over rock a few yards away, and then his boot went into it. The eighteen troopers, bunched closely together, went across the few yards of water, singly, making no sound.

Dennis Forbes waited for them on the other side. He heard the first alien sound then as he squatted in the brush along the stream. Sergeant Grogan heard it at the same time—the soft padding of moccasined feet on hard rock. Grogan pressed down the man nearest him, and the others followed suit.

Second Lieutenant Forbes watched two Apaches go by, not more than three yards from the place where he crouched. He caught their smell, the rancid Indian smell, and he could make out the shapes vaguely, seeing nothing distinct.

When they were gone, he waited another minute before passing on. The wall of the ridge opposite the Mesa was closer than he had imagined. One of the troopers scraped his gun barrel against a rock here, and they pulled up abruptly.

The sound had not been loud, but an Apache passing within twenty yards of the spot would have heard it. Sergeant Grogan cursed softly, steadily.

"Think o' those five boys up on top," Grogan snarled. "We got a chance to run down here."

Dennis Forbes touched the wall with his right hand, and then moved along it. He counted the steps, remembering that the canyon widened near the north end of the Mesa, and that by following the ridge they were pulling away slightly from the Mesa.

HE NOTICED HERE for the first time that his face was wet with perspiration. On top of the Mesa they had been exposed to a cooling breeze, but down here between high walls, the hot air of the day still lingered. It made his clothes stick to his body.

Sergeant Grogan said softly,

"Reckon we're about behind 'em now, lieutenant. I told Bromelli to go to work about thirty minutes after he let Trooper Bailey down the wall."

"Deploy the men," Forbes ordered. "We'll come up in a semi-circle behind them." He was surprised that the plan was working out so well, but they were not yet out of the woods. Not a gun had been fired, and not an Apache killed.

The twenty troopers moved up in single file toward the north end of the Mesa. Second Lieutenant Forbes figured they were about seventy-five yards from the base of the Mesa, and in between them lay Tana and his Apaches, waiting for the troopers to come down that stiff wall.

He was afraid again now—afraid that Tana had not been fooled by the deliberate noises the two troopers had made on top of the Mesa. Very possibly, Tana was now creeping up the south end of the Mesa approaching those five wounded men. He may have sent a half dozen or a dozen to watch the north end; he may have done a lot of things to scramble their plans.

Sergeant Grogan stayed close at hand, a man to take orders from a superior, never bothered with the necessity of working out plans.

Both men crouched on the ground, saying nothing, staring in the direction of the Mesa, waiting, Dennis Forbes saw it first, a tiny pin-point of light, and then another. Ten yards to the right of this last another light flared up.

Sergeant Grogan took a deep breath.

"Reckon that's it, lieutenant," he whispered.

Dennis Forbes watched those three lights grow larger, and it seemed to take a very long time. He thought he heard a

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noise up ahead of him where the Apaches were supposedly waiting.

Brighter and brighter grew those flares up on the rim of the Mesa. Soon they were flaming—huge balls of fire, lighting up the slope running down to the canyon floor. And then they started to move—first one, and then the other. They broke up as they rolled down the incline—three big balls of burning brown grass.

Dennis Forbes heard Grogan's carbine hammer click. He saw the Apaches then—directly ahead of him—dozens of them, squatted on the ground, staring at the fireballs coming toward them. They were clearly silhouetted against the light, small, sinewy men, skins glistening with perspiration.

A carbine banged off to Dennis Forbes' right, and then another. Dazed, the Apaches spun around, seeing nothing in the darkness. Two of them were already stretched out on the ground, writhing.

Other guns opened up on them and they returned the fire, yelling wildly. Grogan's gun roared, and then Dennis Forbes sent one shot from his Colt at a dusky figure fifteen yards ahead of him. The Apache stumbled and went down on hands and knees.

Spencer repeaters were crackling along the line, interspersed with the heavier bang of the Springfields. The Spencers carried seven shots, and at this close range they were doing tremendous damage.

Dennis Forbes watched a skinny little man bound across an open space, shrieking at the top of his voice. He was hit as he ran, and he collapsed in mid air, coming to the earth like a sack of flour dropped from a wagon.

"Tana!" Sergeant Grogan yelled.

It was a brutal business and Dennis

(Continued on page 94)

Not for Love Nor Knuckles

(Continued from page 13)

jaw Jody had said was glass might finish the fight.

But he made Coe's middle his target, and that was a slow and costly attack, because Mike Coe was not a man to be stopped by hurt. It brought knuckles to Rusty's mouth and eyes, half blinding him, jolting him until his thinking was a thready thing that was ready to snap and plunge him into oblivion. He kept ramming his fists into Mike Coe's middle; and then suddenly, strangely, Mike Coe was on the ground and the fight was over.

HE DRESSED, and the crowd followed him into Main Street. He came up against Lee Austin, and heard the man's brittle outburst. Yet he had a feeling Austin's anger was more forced than real.

"Rusty, when are you going to stop being a fool? You could have cleaned up on that fight. And to think I had Jody bet on Mike Coe!"

Jody touched Rusty's arm. She said to her father, "When are you going to stop trying to think for us, dad. It didn't work this time."

"What?"

"I had Gus Mays put our money on Rusty to win," Jody told him. "And when I saw Gus last, I think he must have put his bets the same way. He said Rusty was either smart or an honest fool, and either way he wanted Rusty to take the job of running his mine."

They left Lee Austin standing there, frowning and not fully understanding. They went up the hill, Jody and Rusty, and when they came to her house, they stood there looking back at the town. Lengthening shadows and hurrying men, whiskey and laughter and roughness—Goldfield.

Rusty said, "You shouldn't have told

me what you did about Mike Coe. About his glass jaw."

"I did it for you and me," Jody told him. "It made you win, and that's what I wanted."

Rusty shook his head. "But I didn't hit him once on the jaw." Then he looked at her more intently. "Why," he said, "that was how you wanted it! You knew I wouldn't use what you told me. You knew I'd work only on his stomach, and that was his weak place, not his jaw."

Her smile was gentle-wise. Looking up at him, she saw his slow smile, the crinkle of amusement around his eyes; and then he reached for her. And this, too, was what she wanted.

Once a Killer—

(Continued from page 33)

Cook astride one horse, leading another. He said, "I been looking all over for you. Get your riding britches on; we got work to do. We're riding to the Bar W."

Not until they were on their way to the domain of King John Simon did the old man tell her what was happening. "So they drew lots, the fools," he raged. "Johnson and Nabors and Clifton rode out last night and planted the dynamite. This afternoon they gave King John one more chance and he ran them off his land. Tonight they're going to set it off and blow the dam to hell."

"It'll serve him right," she said, speaking of Simon.

Uncle Bob raged, "Don't you see? It's a trap! *They let those three men plant that dynamite. They want the little fellers to set it off.* Then see what happens. Remember when Wild's dad was killed? Burning and shooting and killing up and down the valley, and everybody laying it to Wild, everybody saying Wild Warneke was on the kill again."

She spurred her horse viciously and Uncle Bob caught her only with difficulty. "Careful, Sue," he panted, "you'll ride the horse to death."

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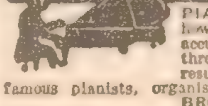

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IT WAS almost dark when they clattered into the yard of the Bar W. A Chinese cook came out to tell them that Warneke wasn't there. Without a word Sue wheeled her lathered horse and sped for the spot where she knew the dam was. It was only some five minutes away from the house. There was no one in sight.

She threw back her head and called, "Wes! Wes Warneke! I know you're there! I know what you're doing! Come out, or I'll warn them all away!"

A moment later Wild Wes Warneke, raging, drew his horse to a stop beside her. "What the hell do you think you're doing here? What—?"

"Wes! You've got to listen to me!" Now words poured from her in a torrent. "Don't you see it'll be the same as it was before? You've said a lot of things were blamed on you that you didn't do. I know in my heart you didn't lead those raids after the death of your father. It was King John's gun-slicks, and it'll be that way again. I know you plan to let Bledsoe and the rest blow your dam! Don't you see what will happen?"

In spite of himself his voice was tense. "All right, that's the way we planned it. But we let them blow it and catch them in the act. There's to be no bloodshed. I promise you that, Sue. We'll simply file suit, I'll attach everything they've got—!"

"You fool, you fool!" she raged.

Uncle Bob Cook broke in. "How about listening to me, Wild? Ain't it the truth that ever since you came back your uncle tried to talk you into toting a gun? How do you know the nesters burned you out in town? How do you know it wasn't one of King John's men?"

Wild Warneke snorted. "Just to get me riled? Nope, Uncle Bob, getting gulched in the cemetery should have shown me they were out for me." He stopped, stared. "What's that?"

"That's the shell from a .30-caliber Sharps," said the old man. "Sue here found it. She gave it to me and I noticed how far off-center the firing pin hit the shell. I managed to borrow Bledsoe's rifle, and Nabors', and a dozen others. The shell didn't fit any of them. *So I got to thinking maybe you wasn't meant to be killed.*"

"I don't get you, Uncle Bob."

"I figured maybe somebody just meant to make you sore as hell so you'd wear a gun and maybe use it when the time came. And I asked myself who in these parts can use a rifle well enough to crease a man on purpose. You know the answer."

"Carlos Leeds! And he was talking about getting that pin centered just today. No, it couldn't be! My uncle, my flesh and blood, wouldn't—?"

"Wes! I wasn't going to show you unless I had to. But Refugio Frios is dying; she sent her son-in-law for me today and she told me something. She's written it out here for you and made me promise to give it to you. King John and Leeds killed your father, *two days* after the Wagners had already left the valley. Read this."

She handed him the paper. He came down out of his hull and lit a match—another—another. His breathing was hard and harsh.

From out of the darkness came the sound of a running horse, then King John Simon's harsh voice grated, "Put those damned matches out. What's going on here?"

"Get down, Uncle John," said Wild, levelly. "Light and read what Refugio has written me."

For a moment there was dead silence, then the old man slid out of his saddle. He said, "Reckon there's no use to read, Wild. I was afraid she'd tell you sometime, damn her."

"Wait, Uncle John. Don't make a move. You had them teach me to be a top gun-slick. You know I can kill you before you touch a butt."

The old man quit moving.

"Funny," went on Wild. "I used to sometimes wonder why you had me taught all those wild ways. Maybe you loved me in your own twisted way, maybe you wanted to make me into the things you could never be physically. You did

it. And you used me. You hated my dad because he was soft and easy-going—so you and Carlos killed him. You were land-crazy and you sent your killers raiding through the valley after dad's death and let them lay it at my door. Yeah, you told me to take it, that you'd get me out of the pen. You did—after ten years. Ten years lost out of my life. Maybe I'd still be rotting in the pen if you hadn't figured this last scheme out in your crooked mind."

THE OLD MAN didn't answer. He was beginning to sag, like a deflating balloon.

"But I disappointed you, didn't I? I'd studied to be a lawyer and I'd hung up my guns for good. You had to get me back in the mood, didn't you? Yes, Uncle John, I know who hid in the grove in the cemetery and shot me. And I think I know who burned me out."

Uncle Bob said, "Wild, you ain't going to let Bledsoe and the others walk into the trap, are you?"

Wild Warneke seemed to be turning it over in his mind. At last he said, "It's a pretty grave crime to dynamite another man's property. But I don't know of any law against a man blowing up what he's bought and paid for himself. You, John Simon. You know where those poor fools planted that dynamite last night. You want to go out there and fire the fuses or do you want to get a bellyful of lead right here?"

Slowly King John Simon turned and limped away from them. . . .

Out on the short dam a few moments later they saw the flare of his match. He turned and shambled back toward safety. From a little knoll some thirty yards away a rifle spoke. King John stumbled and went down, got laboriously to his feet in some manner and wobbled forward.

"God! It's Carlos! It was a frame; they *did* mean to get whoever set it off just for a starter!"

Wild Warneke ran toward the end of the dam where his uncle had collapsed. From the knoll another man plunged

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down, shouting, "Okay, King, I got him! I got him!" It was Carlos Leeds.

Without slowing his pace, Wild Warneke snapped a shot at the killer. He knew without bothering to look that it had centered. Then he had his uncle's body in his arms, came staggering away from the edge of the dam as all hell broke loose behind him.

After a while he opened his eyes and knew that once again Sue Killian was holding him close to her breast. "Uncle John?" She shook her head. "Carlos Leeds?"

"Dead." It was Uncle Bob Cook who answered that.

"Once a killer, always—" he began.

Sue put her fingers over his mouth. "No more, no more, darling. Wild Warneke died back there on the dam, Wild Warneke the killer. There's a new king in the Wingo Valley tonight!"

He sighed a little and thought what a nice queen she'd be.

The Red Rogue's Man

(Continued from page 49)

above the table where the foursome were seated shone down strongly on the schoolmaster. His sallow cheeks and prominent nose was bruised, and Cam remembered pushing a man's face into Nations dust. Slowly his eyes lifted to the schoolmaster's close-cropped brown hair.

"Got to cut it short," he muttered, "if he spends part of the time wearin' a wig—!

"You say somethin'?" Hank Parsons asked.

"Yes," Cam said softly. "Let's get out of here. I—"

"Hey, perfessor," Jones' whisky-husk voice called from behind the bar, "you lost that black bronc of yours? Young feller here sez he found a stray out along the Trail."

The big schoolmaster turned courteously, and straightened. He stared myopically at Cam Lacey, and Cam felt his body grow cold.

"Why no," the answer came smoothly. "Midnight's out back in his corral, I presume. He usually is, save when I take him for an evening run."

Shock tingled through the skin drawn tight across Cam's knuckles. "I'll be around in the mornin'," he said calmly to Hoby Jones. "Mebbe daylight will let us identify the hoss. Now—" he gestured politely toward the back hall— "I wonder if you got a place out back—?"

"Why shore," Jones said heartily. "You'll find the path outside the 'hind door."

From the corner of his eye, Cam saw Long-neck Jim sardonically smiling, and he knew that he was not pulling the wool over the old owlhooter's eyes. Their time would be short, Cam thought grimly.

HANK PARSONS TRAMPED solidly after him down the rear hall, and he said, "I don't know what you're up to, son."

"Mebbe nothin'," Cam told him swiftly, when they reached the open darkness, "and mebbe a lot. If I'm not missin' my guess you were lookin' at the Red Rogue inside there. The school teacher—"

"His hair ain't red."

"It might be when he goes on the raid. "We'll see—" Cam's eyes were already finding the schoolmaster's small log and adobe cabin behind the schoolhouse. He could see the door of it gaping slightly open. "Run for it," he commanded. "We're going to take a look."

They reached the cabin door, and Cam pushed it open and stepped inside. He shut it gently behind them, and brazenly turned up the wick of the lamp that

had been left dimly burning on the plain board table in the center of the room.

Books in soft leather covers were racked against one wall. A small stove and dish cupboard occupied another. A third wall supported a bunk and Sam's racing glance settled on an iron-banded trunk beneath it.

He hauled the trunk onto the floor, and Hank Parsons was ready to put a poker he'd found beside the stove underneath the padlock that closed the lid.

Nails holding the metal hasp screeched and came free. Cam opened the trunk and the tray that lay on top was neatly filled with all the make-up paraphernalia that any actor might desire.

"Dig deeper," Parsons said tensely.

Cam lifted the tray, and he needed to see no more. The brassy length of his own telescope lay atop rumpled clothing, and stuffed carelessly, in alongside it was the curly red hair of a wig.

"Wear that an' some stuff on your face," Hank Parsons said in awed tones, "and your own mother wouldn't recognize yuh. The Red Rogue's been a mighty careful gent—"

"But not careful enough," a voice said from behind them. "Lacey, no man of the Rogue has ever left me—and lived. You—"

THE FIRST DISTANT SHOT came then as Cam Lacey swung toward the door gripping the telescope his father had given him. The sound caught them all like some unseen force. Long-neck Jim Brannigan and the man the settlers about Jones Station knew as their schoolmaster blocked the doorway. Twin Colts jutted from Long-neck Jim's hands, and a small glittering derringer lay in the Red Rogue's palm, but the guns had deserted their targets, as the sound of more shots came faintly from beyond the Red River.

"Those fools!" the Red Rogue cursed. "They couldn't wait until we finished this chore. They've hit that herd. They're trying to take it—"

"And if they do, they'll hold it against

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you and the Devil!" Long-neck Jim Brannigan growled. "We've got to get across the river—"

Cam went toward them, and the heavy telescope in his hands was a better weapon than a Colt at these close quarters. "You ain't crossin' any river save the last one—" he gritted, and the brass tube sparkled in the light as he swung it toward the Red Rogue's head.

The man's shoulder lifted to take the blow, and the short gun in his hand coughed once, and Cam felt streaking fire touch his ribs, then the telescope landed solidly against the side of the Red Rogue's neck. The blow snapped the man's head against his opposite shoulder, staggered him into Brannigan. They went down in a cursing pile, and Cam leapt across them, for all at once the safety of that Jack-knife herd and Joan Cartright meant more than unmasking the Red River Rogue.

"Neat, son, neat!" Hank Parsons was right beside him as Cam raced toward the front of Jones Station. Men were crowding from it, listening to the distant shots, and Cam heard Hoby Jones say resignedly:

"The Red Rogue's at it again, sounds like."

"Take a look at your perfessor's cabin," he snapped as he gathered the stallion's reins, "and what we left there for you. Leastways look at his trunk. Then make your own answers—"

Heels digging deep, he swung the black and Hank Parsons reined his gray alongside. "Them sutlers," he said, grimly, "are apt to ask their schoolteacher some right embarrassin' questions. He won't be botherin' us for quite a spell. He—" and the wind of their ride whipped the words from his lips before Cam could hear them.

They reached the river sands, and the sound of firing was plain even above the rumble of their mounts' hooves. Danger waited for them across the Red, and Cam found himself eager to face it. He'd heard the ugly music of singing lead on more than one raid as the Red Rogue's man, but this time it was different. His bullets would be clean, fighting for something that was right.

SIDE BY SIDE they drove their mounts up the slanting trail the countless hooves of Texas cattle had worn into the banks of the Red, and Cam saw gunflame winking from the mouth of Joan Cartright's tent and from beside the chuck-wagon. Shadowy riders were racing about milling longhorns, trying to split the herd.

Cam rode at one of them, and a long yell tingled in his throat. Guns in each hand, reins looped about the saddle, he guided the stallion with his knees, and he saw the Rogue's raider drop backward from his mount as he loosed lead at the man.

Hank Parsons' Colts were going into action, and raiders who had been bold were turning and making their run for safety before the added strength of these unexpected reinforcements. Outlaws, Cam thought grimly, had never liked the taste of honest lead, and then like a knife piercing his consciousness he heard a thin far scream from behind them.

It was Joan Cartright's voice, and he fought the black into a turn, swinging back toward the Jack-knife camp. Lurid flame was leaping toward the night sky. One of the raiders had managed to fire the chuck-wagon, and he could make out the shape of struggling figures alongside the girl's tent.

"They're tryin' to pick up Joan!" he heard Hank Parsons yell. "If they make it, it'll take the Jack-knife brand to get her back—"

A man with flaming hair topping his head was grappling with the girl, and Cam realized that it was the Rogue himself. He'd talked himself out of the settlers' hands, and so had Long-neck Jim Brannigan, for as he rode in on them, Cam saw the old owlhooter ghost out from the shelter of the girl's tent, and the long metal of the telescope he'd dropped back at the schoolmaster's cabin was glittering in his hands.

"I ain't done much that was good in my life," Cam heard him say, "but I

guess it ain't too late to start. Never was much of a hand at maulin' shemales—"

The brass tube arced, and Cam saw it land solidly across a red-capped skull. He watched the Red Rogue's arms loosen and drop, then the man was pitching forward, and this time Cam Lacey knew he wouldn't be rising again. He had a Colt in his hand, and Long-neck Jim Brannigan made an easy target as he buck-jumped toward his drop-reined mount, but somehow his finger seemed frozen against the guard of the trigger.

Hank Parsons gained his side as the old owlhooter swung into his saddle, and his Colt lifted then sagged. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," he growled. "Mebbe, but for the grace of Jack-knife, and a little gal I used to dangle on my knee, that might be me ridin' away—"

Joan Cartright's cheeks were white when they drew up on either side of her, but she had a smile, and a lifting hand to greet each of them.

Cam caught her fingers, and gripped hard, and he had the feeling of a man coming home. "Mebbe," he told Hank Parsons a little awkwardly, "Jack-knife will mean as much to me someday—"

"I hope so," Joan Cartright said, and a man needed no more promise than her smile offered him.

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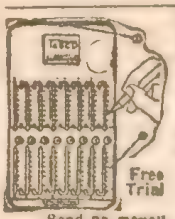

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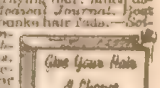

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The Shanghai Voyage

MERCHANT SEAMEN face plenty of hardships and perils, even in peace times. Storms, treacherous reefs, drifting icebergs and derelicts—all these make a sailor's life hazardous at best. In war, his danger is increased a hundredfold by enemy submarines, surface craft and aerial raiders. But at least, today, he is comfortably quartered and fed, and he is well paid for his labors, thanks to favorable legislation as well as the activities of his unions. It was not always that way, however.

Back in the 1850's, the days of "wooden ships and iron men," when vessels were propelled by sail alone, the life of a merchant seafarer was anything but a bed of roses. His voyages were long, his work was arduous, his quarters were cramped, and his meals unappetizing—not to say downright revolting. And all too frequently a sailorman went to sea against his will, the victim of some crimp.

Crimping was a lawless but blatantly open occupation back in those roaring times. San Francisco in particular was a hotbed of crimps, who usually masked their nefarious trade by operating sailors' boardinghouses or saloons. In that day, no ships sailed directly from the Golden Gate to the Chinese port of Shanghai, which was then little more than a fishing village. A man who desired to sail from California to Shanghai had to travel almost around the world.

In consequence, any ship starting on a long or perilous journey was said to be making a "Shanghai voyage," and when a crimp put one of his victims into the crew of such a ship he was said to be "sending him to Shanghai." The phrase later was shortened to the one word, "shanghai," meaning to impress a man forcibly into a vessel's crew.

THE CRIMPS, then, were those who made a profession of shanghaiing sailors. As a rule, when a vessel dropped anchor in San Francisco Bay, many sailors would desert in order to escape the hardships inflicted on them by cruel captains and mates. This would naturally leave the ship short-handed—a condition which was usually rectified by the captain's getting in touch with some shanghai expert and placing an order for as many able-bodied men as he happened to need—five, ten, or twice that many; it made no difference to the crimp, who always delivered the desired quota at a price of anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred dollars a head.

Usually these human cattle were placed on board in an unconscious condition, the result of drugged drinks or a thorough blackjacking. Senseless, they were thrust into fo'c'sle bunks; and when they finally awakened, they would find themselves far out at sea, doomed to a voyage they hadn't wanted.

Black Horse Mesa

(Continued from page 86)

Forbes knew it, but there was no alternative. This band of Apaches had pillaged two ranches up along the San Pablo river. They'd murdered two white women and three small children. Unmolested, they would kill, steal and rape until they were destroyed.

A DOZEN or more managed to break through the ring of steel, but Tana himself was dead, along with fifty or sixty of his young bucks by the time the fire balls burned out. Three of the troopers received wounds, but none of them serious.

Dennis Forbes remembered running forward then, scrambling up the slope toward Black Horse Mesa. He was running with other men, and he could not make out faces in the darkness, but he heard one of them pant,

"Smart as a whip, that young lieutenant. He'll go a long way in this man's army."

Second Lieutenant Forbes wanted to laugh at that. Captain Roger Forbes hadn't gone a long way because he'd never had the pull. A man needed connections in the army.

A trooper was singing off to Dennis Forbes' left as he made his way up the slope. It was Trooper Bailey, a note of hysteria in the man's voice.

"We're marching off for Sitting Bull.
And this is the way we go."

Dennis Forbes repeated that second line. "This is the way we go." That was the way the regular army went—cool, courageous, gambling on one last straw, griping, cursing at times, but never quitting. Most of them would never even get as high as Sergeant Grogan, but they didn't care.

It was this thing which had held Captain Roger Forbes in the army when he had every right to resign for more lucrative employment; it was this also which was going to keep Dennis Forbes in the service. Second Lieutenant Forbes of the Fifth United States Cavalry, knew that as he reached the top of Black Horse Mesa and trotted toward his wounded.

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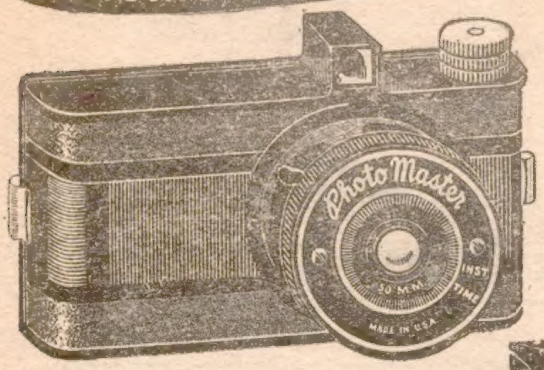

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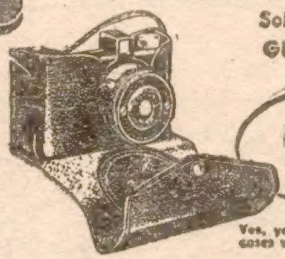

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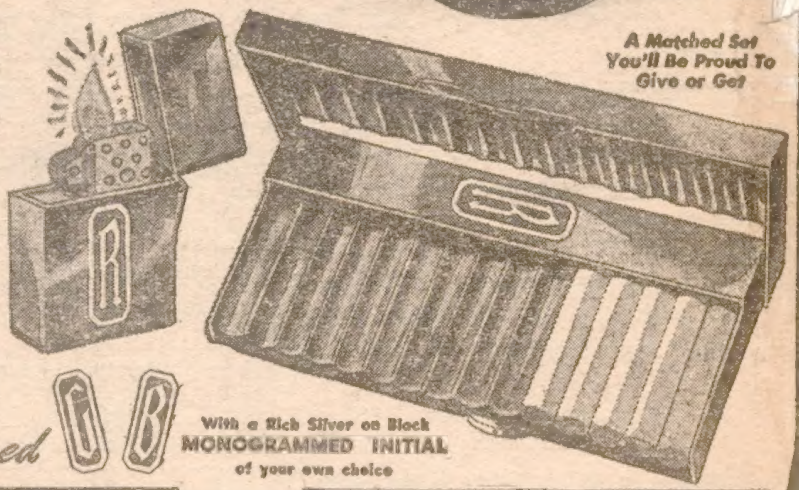

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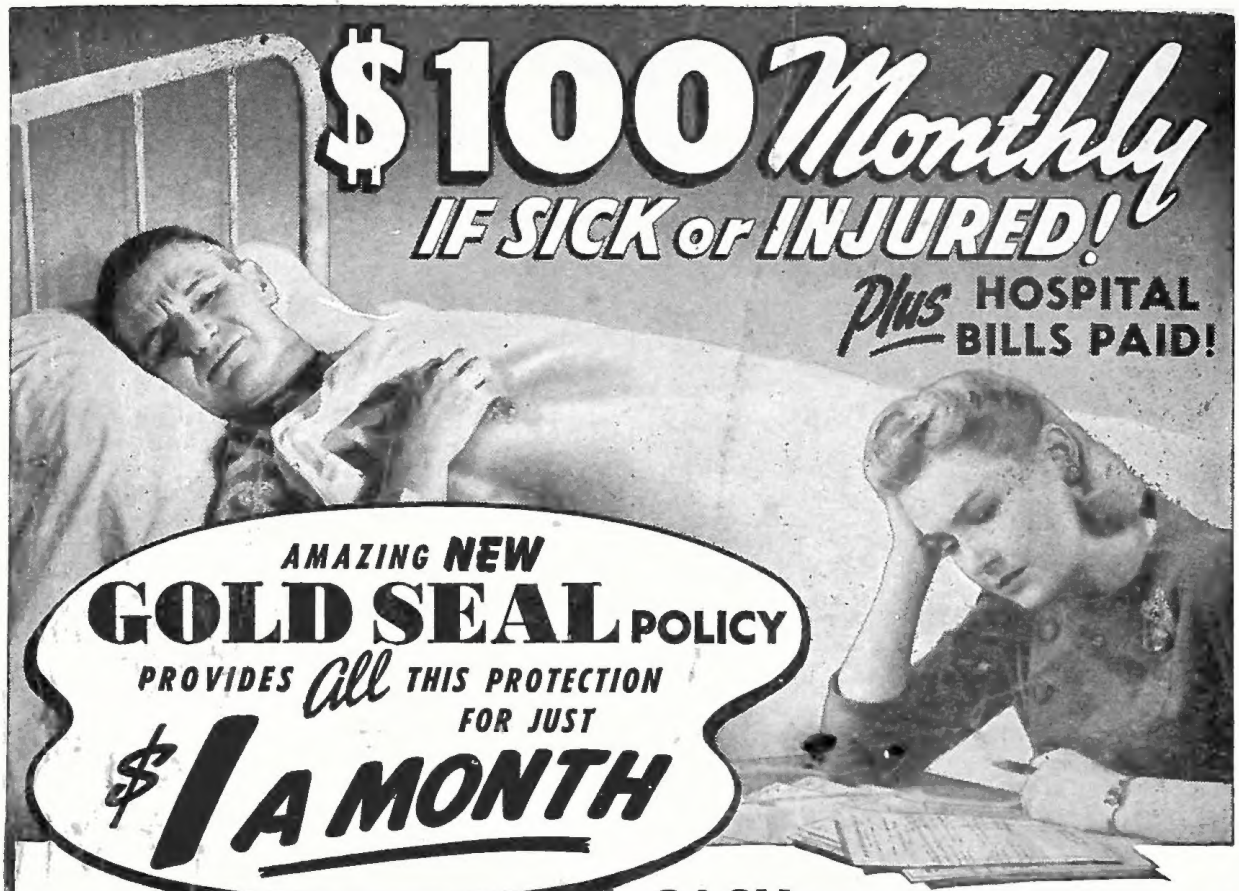

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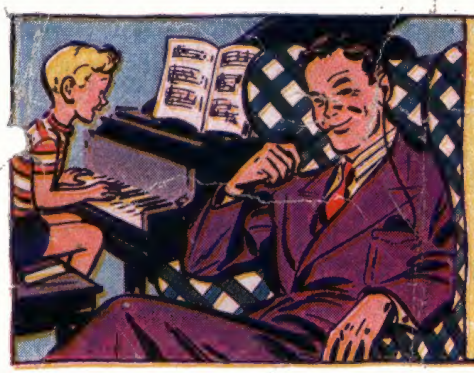

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